

The Virginia Frontier and a Movement Toward Public Education: A Case Study of the Transformation of Liberty Hall Academy to Washington College

BY JOSHUA OWENS

An analysis of ideological movements during America's Early-National years reveals an incredible move toward the publicizing of higher education. The political landscape became inundated with language of civic education for the American people. The transformation was a nationalistic outgrowth from previous decades of classrooms permeated with Enlightenment literature and new forms of student autonomy, demonstrating a clear shift from earlier Colonial models. America's independence from Britain, however, brought reevaluation of nearly every area of public life in the colonies. Republicanism, Jefferson contends, "is merely in the spirit of our people. That would oblige even a despot to govern us republicanly."¹ Unlike the government they just detached themselves from, the founding generation was compelled to put the power of governance in the hands of the people directly. A republic requires "an extraordinary degree of public-spiritedness, self-restraint, and practical wisdom in their citizens."² This degree of involvement from the public put educational reform as a priority of the founding leadership. As a republic thrives on excellent, knowledgeable citizens, education becomes central to providing the context from which people learn to be citizens, teaching each that "he does not belong to himself, but that he is public property."³

The republican ideology, in many ways affected the purposes of higher education institutions that grew out of the period. Liberty Hall Academy was founded in 1776 as a frontier alternative for higher education. Originally an outpost for Presbyterian theology, over the first few years of the schools existence, an ideological synthesis took place whereby combined Enlightenment and Protestant values provided a "religiously grounded moderation" to the classroom.⁴ However, with the introduction of a republican urge for education in the state, Liberty Hall found itself trying to fit its religious framework in a public sphere. This case-study of Liberty Hall Academy's Early-National years reveals a unique look at the process by which this small, frontier, religious school continued its transformation to a nationally recognized institution for "public" knowledge. To properly place the movement in context, however, it is important to briefly treat a few influential works on the republican educational movement.

¹ Thomas Jefferson Letter to Samuel Kercheval, 12 July 1816.

² Lorraine Smith and Thomas L. Pangle, *The Learning of Liberty: The Educational Ideas of the American Founders* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1993), 1.

³ Benjamin Rush, *A Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools*, 1786.

⁴ Robert M. Calhoon, *Political Moderation in America's First Two Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 171.

Lorraine and Thomas Pangle's 1993 work *The Learning of Liberty* followed the modern scholarly consensus and suggested that it was the founding generation that established proper modes of education for the future of American higher education. Reflecting on two of these innovators, the authors stated that "Franklin and Jefferson show how even immensely engaged lives can be made richer through a love of thought for its own sake. By living lives at once truly active and truly reflective, they make one of the greatest contributions that can be made to the education of any nation."⁵ Jeffersonian models of education called for specific and controlled higher education institutions. In order for society to progress in unison, a republicanized system of public education was necessary.

Likewise, Jennings Wagoner's *Jefferson and Education* (2004) argued that Jefferson's model for Republican education exemplified two specific traits. First, that "educational theory was inseparable from political theory"; the survival of a republican form of government depended on an educated populace that would be "virtuous and vigilant."⁶ Secondly, freedom in all of its forms was essential to both a sound educational system and a well-functioning "republican polity."⁷ As in *The Learning of Liberty*, Wagoner argued that Jefferson's Republic was inextricably tied to a foundation of education for the public. Since the governing power was directly in the hands of the citizens, Jefferson argued, it was vital for the survival of both the Republic and the country that the citizenry be well-acquainted with a basic, Republican-focused educational system. Though clearly "limited by his own and his society's assumptions," Jefferson's model typifies the Republican educational mantra of a greater, public knowledge.⁸

Cameron Addis's 2003 work, *Jefferson's Vision for Education: 1760-1845* provided a further lens by which to view this changing educational philosophy taking place in American pedagogical theory. Addis argued that Early-National ideas of higher education fell under concepts of "control" or "empowerment."⁹ Some urged that education should be used to control the working classes. Webster, Addis contend, hoped to "use education to inculcate subordination to authority."¹⁰ Jefferson, however, thought just the opposite. He believed a basic understanding of liberties, natural rights, state rights, and virtue was a necessary tool to safeguard against despotic governing control. Regardless of the inter-Republican perspective, however, Addis also contends that public forms of controlled education lay at the heart of a Republican society.

Though much of this Republican-educational theory took place at the leadership level, its practical influence is seen throughout many institutions of higher education

⁵ Pangle, *Learning of Liberty*, 8.

⁶ Jennings Wagoner, *Jefferson and Education* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 27.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁹ Cameron Addis, *Jefferson's Vision for Education: 1760-1845* (New York: Peter Lang Publishers, 2003), 5.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

during the period. Liberty Hall Academy, like the majority of American colleges, was founded for specific religious purposes.¹¹ The mid-eighteenth century Enlightenment's effects in America, however, provided ample new literary and philosophical worldviews for new institutions to investigate.¹² As a Presbyterian school on the Virginia frontier, Liberty Hall found itself struggling with similar ideological battles with its founding on the tail end of this Enlightenment wave. Fifteen years after its establishment, the school was in consistent financial trouble, an unfortunate trend that led to its seeking counsel from the Presbyterian Synod of Virginia in 1793. The Synod recommended a coalition between the two entities, whereby Liberty Hall would establish a separate school specifically for ministry training in exchange for some financial consideration from the Synod. The new seminary would teach the "principals of the Presbyterian Church . . . as a Branch of Science in the Academy of Liberty Hall," taking in connection with it studies in the humanities.¹³

The Board agreed to the terms and formally set out to undertake the project. The agreement suggests, however, that while balancing opposing ideologies in the classroom, Liberty Hall was not ready to concede to a wholly public system of education. Financial assistance from the general Synod of Virginia not only signaled a parochial connection, but it also solidified a lasting, private educational relationship. Given the waning religious fervor in the 1790s and the school's chronic financial instability, however, the assistance from the Synod seemed like a reasonable solution, regardless of ideological limitations the Board may have felt.¹⁴

It was only a few months before the school found itself at odds with the Synod. Nearby Hampden-Sydney College was also a Presbyterian school founded out of the Hanover Presbytery. In September, 1792, Liberty Hall's rector and founder, William Graham was requested by Hampden-Sydney "in order to remove him and to take the presidency of their College."¹⁵ This request was made through the local Presbytery at Lexington, indicating a necessary departure Graham would need to take. Liberty Hall's Board, however, would not let Graham go easily and without Graham's consent. Writing to the Synod of Virginia, the Board earnestly requested that they would not "deprive" them of their rector. They set forth an impressive array of apologetic discourses in order to show how they were equal to, perhaps even greater than Hampden-Sydney despite their small size and relative poverty. Noting their differences, the Board stated, "[O]ut of our smaller numbers we can say that God has been pleased to bring more useful men

¹¹ Josh Owens, "A Case Study of the Founding Years of Liberty Hall Academy: The Struggle Between Enlightenment Values on the Virginia Frontier," in *The Journal of Backcountry Studies*. Vol. IV, Issue 2 (Autumn 2009), 2.

¹² Rush Welter, *Popular Education and Democratic Thought in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 11.

¹³ Washington and Lee University, "Liberty Hall Board of Trustees Minutes," April 30, 1792, 67.

¹⁴ Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education: The Colonial Experience 1607-1783* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1970), 14.

¹⁵ Liberty Hall Letter to the Synod of Virginia; in Liberty Hall Minutes, September 30, 1793, 72.

upon the stage of public action. And especially into the Ministry of the Gospel. Yea in this respect, we have purposed every seat of learning in the State. Which we conceive must and ought to have much weight with the Synod to countenance our institution.”¹⁶ Understanding their argument for validity and intentionality of education, the Synod later agreed to leave the decision in the hands of Graham, who quickly denied Hampden-Sydney’s offer.

Due to lack of student enrollment and, thereby, a lack of funds, the proposed divinity school dwindled away a short time later. Further, because the divinity branch did not generate funds, Liberty Hall found itself in persistent debt once more.¹⁷ While not recorded in the Board’s minutes, these two episodes of failure and frustration with Synods across the state may have left a bitter resentment in the Board’s dealings with sectarian models of control.

While certainly betrayal and failure put the leadership of Liberty Hall in a distressing position, the growing Republican notions of public education financed by the state may have led to one of the most radical changes the school would ever undertake. Desperately in debt from the erection of the divinity school buildings, the school “applied to the legislature to vest in them the title to certain escheated land in Rockbridge and the adjacent countries.”¹⁸ Unfortunately, this request was denied. The appeal to the state, however, signifies Liberty Hall’s gradual movement toward a more public governing body, a purposeful shift toward financial security, and perhaps, non-sectarian curricular controls. Though the indebtedness was doubtfully an embarrassment to the leadership, they were not without hope. The Board was “of opinion that some aid from the public was necessary to preserve it from sinking into an useless condition,” an opinion that encouraged them to once again apply for public funding in 1795.¹⁹ The assistance, like the previous attempt, was denied.

In January, 1796, Graham called a meeting of the Board and urged them to “take under consideration some direct information he had received of the Legislature of this State having resolved there . . . that the President of the United States was about to bestow his hundred shares in the James River Company to aid” a school in the “upper part of the State.”²⁰ The James River Company, through the legislature, originally bestowed the one hundred shares on George Washington as sign of gratitude for all he had done to promote their project.²¹ Washington, already one of the wealthiest men in the country, was sternly opposed to the “principle of gratuities,” and was apprehensive about

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁷ Ollinger Crenshaw, *General Lee’s College: The Rise and Growth of Washington and Lee University* (New York: Random House Publishers), 24.

¹⁸ “Historical Papers, No. 1 – 1890,” of Washington and Lee University (Baltimore: John Murphy and Co., 1890), 48.

¹⁹ Liberty Hall Minutes, October 22, 1795, 143.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, January 5, 1796, 143-144.

²¹ Crenshaw, 27.

accepting the shares. However, he feared his dismissal of the funds would undermine public confidence in the canal project he had helped establish.²² Washington decided to accept the stock on the condition they be delegated to public use. Believing education “was the most worthy object of his philanthropy,”²³ he requested of the legislature that the funds be released to a school “at such a place in the upper country as . . . may be convenient to the inhabitants thereof.”²⁴

The Board anxiously prepared a letter to the President, appealing to the public benefits of giving his charity to their school.²⁵ In the letter, they persisted that the gift would be used to enhance the quality of education for the local public in “essential” areas of “Mathematical and Philosophical Apparatus.”²⁶ Starkly contrasting the letters sent to local Synods requesting assistance, this letter made no mention of religious or sectarian leanings whatsoever in its recounting the purpose and history of the institution.

Among those in the lottery for the funds, Washington considered Hampden-Sydney, and at Jefferson’s urging, New London Academy.²⁷ After extensive deliberation on part of the Virginia Legislature and Washington, he decided to release the funds to Liberty Hall based on their “zealous and persevering exertions . . . made, for the promotion of learning.”²⁸ Writing to the school in 1798, the retired President explained his decision to the Board, stating, “To promote literature in this rising empire, and to encourage the arts, have ever been amongst the warmest wished of my heart. And if the donation . . . is likely to prove a means to accomplish these ends, it will contribute to the gratification of my desires.”²⁹

While it would be several years before the funds began to return a profit, both the act of applying for the funds and the acceptance of such application by George Washington strongly indicates a movement toward publicizing education at Liberty Hall. Interestingly, though, on the daily operational side of the school, the Board members still remained completely Presbyterian. Further, religious education and a specific school of ministry remained central to the curricular design. Yet, having incorporated in 1782, and now receiving significant financial assistance under the semblance of public education,

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ “A Collection of All Such Acts of the Assembly of Virginia of a Public and Permanent Nature as Have Passed Since the Session of 1801” (Richmond: Samuel Pleasants, 1808), 7; Available on [<http://books.google.com/books?q=a+collection+of+all+such+acts&btnG=Search+Books>], Internet; (accessed on April 24, 2010).

²⁵ Liberty Hall Minutes, January 1796, 185-191.

²⁶ Ibid., 187.

²⁷ Andrew Moore, speaking of George Washington; in Crenshaw, *General Lee’s College*, 28.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ George Washington letter to Liberty Hall Academy, June 17, 1798; in “Historical Papers No. 1,” 54.

Liberty Hall was unsteadily positioned between competing ideological paradigms for education, one sectarian and one public.

Floating on this ideological dividing line, the school very soon found itself with a significant dilemma. Three months after Washington's release of the funds, the Virginia Legislature held an assembly that passed a new charter requiring the school to adopt a new name, Washington College. Further, the charter disposed the old Board and named a new leadership that was to include the Governor of Virginia.³⁰ The curriculum would change as well, as four "schools" were to be constituted: languages, natural philosophy, mathematics, and logic.³¹ The omission of religious content was part of the Republican public educational wave, and thus not surprising that the Legislature would dismiss its significance in a college setting.

While the transfer of James River shares to the academy "was likely viewed as a conveyance of public funds to a private school," the Legislature possibly thought the charter would provide substance and necessary conversion of the school into "an enlarged and more useful state institution."³² There has been speculation as to whether Jefferson was influential in this decision as there are remarkable similarities between the curricular and operational changes proposed on Liberty Hall and those proposed in his later plans for the University of Virginia.³³ Further, the explicit removal of Presbyterian control insinuates a Jeffersonian-like ideology behind the quickly passed charter. Jefferson's former William and Mary classmate and resident in Staunton wrote to Washington specifically requesting that Liberty Hall would not receive the funds, stating, "their regulations are too contracted and professedly formed to produce Presbyterian clergymen rather than produce the general purposes of education."³⁴ Perhaps confirming this suspicion, both Liberty Hall's minutes and the "Historical Papers" of the college show concern that in the new leadership "not one was a clergyman, much less a Presbyterian clergyman, and scarcely one, if even one, was a member of a Presbyterian church."³⁵ However, there is no explicit evidence to link the policy makers' decision with the influence of Republican radicals seeking to eradicate religious institutions altogether.

³⁰ James Morrison Hutcheson, "Virginia's 'Dartmouth College Case'," in *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (Apr., 1943), 135.

³¹ Crenshaw, 29.

³² *Ibid.*, 30.

³³ *Ibid.*; See also Herbert Adams, *Thomas Jefferson and the University of Virginia* (Washington: Government Printing Office), 1888; Cameron Addis, *Jefferson's Vision for Education, 1760-1845* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing), 2003; Charles F. Arrowood, *Thomas Jefferson and Education in a Republic* (New York: McGraw-Hill), 1930; James B. Conant, *Thomas Jefferson and the Development of American Public Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 1962; Jennings Wagoner, *Jefferson and Education* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press), 2004; Mary N. Woods, "Thomas Jefferson and the University of Virginia: Planning the Academic Village," *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (Oct., 1985), 266-283.

³⁴ Archibald Stuart letter to George Washington, in "Virginia's 'Dartmouth College Case'," 137.

³⁵ "Historical Papers, No. 1," 68.

Upon the news of this drastic change, the Board considered the charter's contents and "unanimously declared it as their opinion that the same is an unjustifiable infringement of the Rights of the Corporation of Liberty Hall and an instance of Tyrannical imposition in the Legislature."³⁶ After electing a member of the Board to represent them at the next Virginia Assembly meeting, the school moved to have the act repealed. Beyond the infringement of the school's incorporated rights, the Board was also concerned that the rapid change in leadership and curriculum would be contrary to the wishes of "those good Citizens who for the promotion of Virtue and Literature gave largely of their estates to the Academy."³⁷

Zechariah Johnston, a trustee of the Academy and a member of the House of Delegates in Rockbridge Country, took up Liberty Hall's case with the Legislature in 1798, and after winning the battle, the original Act of Incorporation of 1782 was once again restored.³⁸ The principle of this scenario later became the core line of argument of Dartmouth College against a similar charter that had come down from the Federal level. Alumnus of Dartmouth and prolific educational author, Daniel Webster, cited this Virginia ruling in his defense of Dartmouth's state rights against those promulgated by the Federal government. Like Liberty Hall, Webster won the case, a further illustration of the significance "not only to education but to the integrity of business corporations and all other kinds of legally chartered organizations."³⁹

Washington College went on to receive a considerable endowment from Virginia's newly-formed Society of Cincinnati that, while bringing several operational and public problems of its own. Though the funds received from the Society provided generously to the cause of public education at Washington College, it took nearly thirty more years before the school would rest on solid a financial foundation. With the retirement of Rector Graham in 1796, and seceding president George Baxter's proclivity for the Baptist movement, Washington College quickly lost its dogmatic Presbyterian commitments in favor of a more Republican form of public, non-religious education.

While Liberty Hall was but one of many small institutions wrestling with private and public spheres of education, there are several important factors about the transitional years of the school that are of great historical value. With republican educational ideologies of public forms of higher education inundating Virginian life, it appears as though Liberty Hall moved in that direction as well. Seeking for avenues out of significant debt, the school repeatedly applied for public funds while still remaining committed to a private, sectarian form of education. In a well-versed letter to retired President George Washington, the school declared its steadfast civic nature, its prime public location, and its non-religious curriculum. Having received the funds and after toting this ideological line for a short period, the Virginia Legislature called on Liberty Hall to signify its public committal to state education by changing their name, leadership,

³⁶ Liberty Hall Minutes, January 31, 1797.

³⁷ Liberty Hall letter to Legislature of Virginia, 1797; in Crenshaw, *General Lee's College*, 30.

³⁸ Hutcheson, 137.

³⁹ Crenshaw, 31.

and disavowing all religious proclivities. While the school successfully battled the charter, the commitment to public education seems to already have taken place on an ideological level. The board quickly lost its religious enthusiasm and within twenty years, the classroom's efforts were devoted to all the subjects of a proper, non-sectarian, republican education.

Liberty Hall's experience also opens avenues for further studies addressing the questions of the meaning of "public" education within a Republic. For the Virginia Legislature in 1798, "public" meant non-religious. Explicit ideologies found in Enlightenment literature, however, were not considered sectarian and were still encouraged in the classrooms. Though present-day institutions are still assessed as "public" largely based on sources of funding, it appears the nature of Early-National public education enforced curricular bias as well. What is most significant for Liberty Hall, then, was its success in defending the integrity of educational freedoms under State jurisdiction, a success that provided a precedent for later institutions to model. Furthermore, this opens door for further studies related to higher education and republican thought. While case studies such as this represent pieces of the movement, a comparative look at republican discourse on education and what curricular practices were taking place in actuality would be extremely beneficial in further identifying ideological origins of America's formative years.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- "A Collection of All Such Acts of the Assembly of Virginia of a Public and Permanent Nature as Have Passed Since the Session of 1801." Richmond: Samuel Pleasants, 1808; Available on [<http://books.google.com/books?q=a+collection+of+all+such+acts&btnG=Search+Books>], Internet; (accessed on April 24, 2010).
- Addis, Cameron Addis. *Jefferson's Vision for Education: 1760-1845*. New York: Peter Lang Publishers, 2003.
- Archibald Stuart letter to George Washington, in "Virginia's 'Dartmouth College Case'."
- Calhoun, Robert M. *Political Moderation in America's First Two Centuries*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Cohen, Ronald D. "Socialization in Colonial New England," in *History of Education Quarterly*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (Spring, 1973).
- Cremin, Lawrence A. *American Education: The Colonial Experience 1607-1783*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1970.
- Crenshaw, Ollinger. *General Lee's College: The Rise and Growth of Washington and Lee University*. New York: Random House Publishers.

George Washington letter to Liberty Hall Academy, June 17, 1798; in “Historical Papers No. 1.”

“Historical Papers, No. 1 – 1890,” of Washington and Lee University. Baltimore: John Murphy and Co., 1890.

Hutcheson, James Morrison. “Virginia’s ‘Dartmouth College Case,’” in *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (Apr., 1943).

Liberty Hall Letter to the Synod of Virginia, quoted from Liberty Hall Minutes, September 30, 1793.

Miller, G. Howard. *The Revolutionary College: American Presbyterian Higher Education, 1707-1837*. New York: New York University Press, 1976.

Owens, Joshua. “A Case Study of the Founding Years of Liberty Hall Academy: The Struggle Between Enlightenment Values on the Virginia Frontier,” in *The Journal of Backcountry Studies*. Vol. IV, Issue 2 (Autumn 2009).

Pangle, Lorraine Smith and Thomas L. *The Learning of Liberty: The Educational Ideas of the American Founders*. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1993.

Rush, Benjamin. *A Plan for the Establishment of Public Schools*, 1786.

Rush, Benjamin. *Thoughts Upon the Mode of Education Proper in a Republic*, 1786.

Thomas Jefferson Letter to Samuel Kercheval, 12 July 1816.

Wagoner, Jennings Wagoner. *Jefferson and Education*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

Washington and Lee University, “Liberty Hall Board of Trustees Minutes.”

Welter, Rush. *Popular Education and Democratic Thought in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1962.