



Richmond College: 175 Years of Spider Men

Joe Boehman, Dean of Richmond College

This is the text of the address given at the 2015 Founder's Day Dinner.

President Frederic Boatwright initiated the first celebration of the establishment of Richmond College, which he termed Charter Day, in 1940. President Boatwright wanted to recognize the 100th anniversary of the University's founding, and saw an opportunity to develop a campus tradition. It was his hope that the University community would celebrate Founder's Day on March 4th each year. Unfortunately, the United States' participation in World War II curtailed the practice after only two years, and it was never revitalized on a campus-wide scale.

Founder's Day was celebrated from time to time during Dean Mateer's tenure, but it was done on a much smaller scale. His last Founder's Day event was close to fifteen years ago, and involved inviting the RCSGA Senate to old Columbia for a dinner. The tradition was revitalized last year to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the coordinate college system, and it is my hope that someday we may finally realize President Boatwright's wish for this day and see an annual University-wide Founder's Day event, as March 4th holds a special significance in the history of the University.

175 years ago today, on March 4th, 1840 the Virginia Legislature granted a charter for "*a Seminary of learning for the instruction of youth in the various branches of science and literature, the useful arts and the learned and foreign languages, which shall be called and known by the name of Richmond College.*" This "Seminary of learning" grew out of an actual seminary; The Virginia Baptist Seminary was founded in 1832, and the Virginia Baptist Education Society had been formed two years earlier. The seminary began admitting students who had not had a calling to the ministry, and in due time it made sense to expand the mission of the institution.

The first campus was located on the grounds of an old mansion once owned by the Haxall family, who at the time owned the largest milling operation in Virginia. The mansion was named "Columbia" and stands to this day at the corner of Grace and Lombardy Streets.

In the early days, Columbia *was* Richmond College. The basement of the building housed a dining hall, a chapel, two classrooms, and a study room. The first floor held the president's office, a classroom, a society hall, and a library. The second floor was a dormitory and also held apartments for two bachelor faculty members. 68 students were enrolled in the early years, and the first bachelor's degrees were conferred in 1849 to Poindexter Smith Henson and Josiah Ryland.

The College increased its student body and endowment in its first twenty years. 161 students were enrolled in 1861, and there were 68 alumni. The College ceased operations during the Civil War as most of the students and faculty went to fight for the Confederacy. When the war was over, one fifth of the alumni and many members of the student body had been killed, the campus was a camp for the Union Army, the endowment was worthless, and the equipment and books of the College were stolen as spoils of war.

Through the generosity of alumni and the Virginia Baptist Society, funds were raised to reopen the College in the fall of 1866. Over the next 50 years a beautiful campus thrived within the borders of Ryland, Broad, Lombardy, and Franklin Streets, near the current campus of Virginia Commonwealth University.

Although women had been enrolled in Richmond College toward the end of the 19th century, the prevailing wisdom at the time was that higher education was the dominion of men. The selection of Frederic Boatwright as president of Richmond College in 1895 set in motion the series of events that ultimately moved the campus to its current location on the West End in 1914 and established Westhampton College as a coordinate college, “of equal grade, and having similar courses of instruction.” Westhampton College existed on one side of the lake, and Richmond College on the other. To this day, we refer to the Westhampton and Richmond “sides” of the campus. In 1920, the name of the institution was changed to the University of Richmond, but the coordinate colleges remained as separate entities well into the later part of the 20th century.

Through these years there was little conversation about masculinity as a construct among the students and faculty, but without question the Deans of the College, starting with John Metcalf and continuing through Raymond Pinchbeck, Clarence Gray, and Austin Grigg, talked with the young men of the College about character, values, making sound decisions, and being a good citizen on campus and in the greater community. First year men, or “rats”, had very peculiar rules that they had to follow, including the subtle hazing of wearing beanies. Panty raids were popular at different periods of the College’s history, something that has thankfully not survived to the present day.

In the late 1980’s, Dean Richard Mateer was charged with developing meaningful traditions and a sense of place for the College, which admittedly lagged Westhampton in that regard. The result of his – and the student leaders of the RCSGA’s – work brought about several of the College’s traditions and signature programs, such as Living/Learning Communities, the Senior Dinner, Investiture, the Class Photo, and the Class Flag. In 1991, President Morrill and the Board of Trustees formed the School of Arts & Sciences and at the same time reaffirmed the coordinate colleges “as a central dimension of the University’s undergraduate residential, student life, and educational program.”

Today, Richmond College stands as perhaps the most unique feature of a University that prides itself on its uniqueness. Women and men live on both sides of the lake, and there are more coed residence halls than single gender, yet Richmond College still exists. I would contend that Richmond College is not a physical place – the College is no longer on a map, and for the most part is no longer defined by bricks and mortar – but it exists as a community, one that as it celebrates its 175th birthday has found itself again.

So why should we celebrate Founder's Day? I believe there are three very good reasons why we should gather annually in early March to remember the establishment of that "Seminary of Learning."

First, without the establishment of Richmond College, the University of Richmond we know today would not exist. Had the decision to incorporate as a liberal arts college not been made, the Virginia Baptist Seminary might have thrived as an institution to train young men for the ministry. In that alternate universe, some other institution would have risen from the ashes of the Civil War and been home to our history...or perhaps not. It took an amazingly random convergence of individuals, time, and place to create this University, and had things been just a bit different we would not be that amazing school that revels in its uniqueness. We might not have that amazing collection of 5 schools for a institution of this size, we might not have a great benefits of a liberal arts institution with a top-ranked business school, we might not have a Division I athletic program that excels on the playing fields as well as the classroom, and we might not have been the only school that dares to call ourselves Spiders.

Second, the establishment of Richmond College ultimately created a space for us to discuss masculinity in a way that frankly is not done on any other college campus. The College not only strives to educate men and challenge students to pursue lives of purpose, but to help shape society's perception of men and masculinity by engaging our students in the exploration of what it means to be a man in today's world. Richmond College promotes a concept known as the Positive Image of Masculinity, and our students are encouraged to discover their best selves and to define masculinity in terms that are authentic to them.

All too often, the conversation about college men involves a good deal of negativity and blame. Men are supposed to "be a man" utilizing a very narrow definition of masculinity. I think that today's college men are starting to look at that paradigm differently. The discussions that we have with students explore the many ways that masculinity can be expressed. Richmond College today promotes a diverse and inclusive community of authentic men, and I am happy to report that our students reflect that ideal.

Finally, celebrating the establishment of Richmond College allows us the opportunity to share our stories. President Ayers, in his inauguration speech in 2008, reminded us of the power of story telling. He said, "If we look at the edges of the story, into the shadows, we see things we cannot see in the broad light of the middle. If we listen carefully, we can hear the quieter stories that tell us something important about the enduring spirit of this place."

Those "quieter stories" are not told by the legends of our University. The stories of Boatwright, May Keller, Pinchbeck, E. Claiborne Robins, Bruce Heilman, Ed Ayers, and all the rest have been and will be passed down through the generations of this institution. The quieter stories – the ones that truly tell us about the spirit of the University and the College – belong to you. As we gather here tonight, alumni have shared their experiences with our current students, and the students have shared a bit about their experiences with the alums. I am willing to bet that with a few changes to names and details the stories are remarkably similar. And that is the spirit of this place. This is what we mean when we say, "I am Richmond College."

I ask the students to listen closely to the alums and I know you will hear echoes of the Positive Image of Masculinity. You will hear them speak of how they act with sound judgment, demonstrate a generosity of self, and live their lives confidently.

Alumni, if you listen to the stories of the students, you may hear echoes of your own time at Richmond. We have good young men here, and in many cases exceptional young men. I think it is safe to say that they will uphold the legacy of the College well.

Perhaps when we gather for the 200th anniversary of the establishment of Richmond College it will be as part of a University celebration, just as President Boatwright had wanted. Whether that happens or not, we should look for opportunities to gather, tell stories, and celebrate the beginnings of this amazing University as a Seminary of Learning known as Richmond College.

Sources

Alley, J.R. (2010). *University of Richmond*. Charleston, SC. Arcadia Publishing.

Alley, R.E. (1973). *Frederic W. Boatwright*. Richmond, VA. The University of Richmond.

Richmond College (1914). *The New Richmond College...A Brief Sketch of Organization, Course of Study, and Material Equipment of the Colleges of the Liberal Arts*. Acquired from Boatwright Library Digital Collection *For the Centuries*, <http://centuries.richmond.edu/items/show/612>.

Ryland, Garnett, (1914). *The Old Richmond College: An Address Delivered at Commencement, June 9, 1914 by Garnett Ryland, '92*. Acquired from Boatwright Library Digital Collection *For the Centuries*, <http://centuries.richmond.edu/items/show/606>.