



Inaugural Address

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Ninth President of the University of Richmond

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This is indeed a day to which I have been looking forward for some time—the chance to celebrate with all of you this institution’s rich past, its impressive recent momentum, and its promise for the future.

I am grateful to all of you for being here today. Let me thank especially:

Secretary Morris and Mayor Wilder for their warm greetings and the support of the Commonwealth and the city;

The faculty, staff, students, and alumni for their wonderful welcome to me, Abby, Nate, and Hannah since our arrival and their remarkably kind words today;

Drew Faust, a treasured colleague and friend, for her gracious contributions during these two days;

Delegates, including a number of other presidents, joining us from other institutions;

The Board of Trustees and Trustees Emeriti for their dedication to the University, and particularly George Wellde for his leadership, and along with his wife, Patty, generous support of the institution and friendship to me; and

All of the colleagues and students participating in our ceremony today and the legions who have worked many, many hours for many, many months to make possible our Inauguration and Reunion celebrations.

It is a privilege to be part of this community.

At such an event—where we don archaic robes and regalia, where we welcome delegates from institutions across the nation and across the ocean, from one founded in 1167 to others founded in 1972, where we invoke the great leaders who have made it possible for us to be here today, and where we reunite with friends who have been associated with our university for so many years—it’s hard not to think about our place in the flow of time. (Especially, perhaps, if you happen to be a historian asked to give a speech . . .)

More often it is easy to forget about history, swept up as we are in today and tomorrow. But our history holds the seeds of what we can be, of what we can do, of what we can dream. Let's remind ourselves how we got here today.

What eventually became the University of Richmond began as a small Baptist academy in the middle of Virginia in 1830, in a schoolhouse on a private farmstead called "Dunlora." I hold in my hand nails from one of the fallen buildings at Dunlora, some of the few remainders of a long-ago vision. After Dunlora, the Baptists moved to a farm, closer to here, where the students worked in fields and shops between classes in languages, mathematics, science, geography, and history as well as theology.

Restless and ambitious, the founders chartered themselves in 1840 as Richmond College and moved closer to the city. The leaders of the school worked throughout the 1840s and 1850s to build up the College, raising money from Baptists across the state, creating seven academic departments, and purchasing their first laboratory equipment. By 1860, Richmond College enrolled over a hundred students and occupied a handsome building about a mile from the State Capitol.

It was at this time that the young men of Richmond College, like many young white men across the Commonwealth and the South, proclaimed themselves eager to fight to establish a separate nation. The Trustees pledged the College's resources, laboriously gained over the preceding thirty years, to the Confederacy. A fifth of the graduates of Richmond College died fighting for the Confederacy over the next four years and the College lost everything—its buildings occupied by Federal troops, its endowment rendered worthless, its books and apparatus scattered, its once booming city in ashes. But in 1873 ten thousand Virginia Baptists came to a canvas tabernacle on the College's campus. There, they pledged more than a hundred thousand dollars to revitalize Richmond College—significant sacrifice, and confidence, amidst the poverty and uncertainty of the postwar era. The University began anew.

About this time, the College decided it could do without a president for the next quarter century. I'm sure that was a bad idea, though the record doesn't seem to be as clear on the terrible consequences of that oversight as it might. In fact, the place seems to have flourished as the New South era began and many of the features of a modern college emerged. It was in 1893, watching some spindly baseball players, that a sportswriter dubbed the Richmond team the "Spiders." (The college's earlier nickname had been "The Mules," so we might pause just briefly to ponder the possibilities and implications of that road

not taken.) Fortunately, in 1895, the trustees came to their senses and recreated the presidency. They appointed Professor Frederic Boatwright, only 26 years old, to the post.

Boatwright led a campaign to join Richmond College with a new Baptist college for women, Westhampton, and to build a brand new campus to house them both. In 1914, the flourishing institution moved to rolling hills by a beautiful lake that stood as a fine natural division between the sexes. President Boatwright hired Professor May Keller as the first female dean of a college in the South. A holder of a doctorate from Heidelberg, where she wrote a dissertation on Anglo-Saxon weapons, Keller would be a formidable intellect and force of nature for decades to come.

President Boatwright, talking with well-earned pride when the new campus opened, declared that henceforth “all things new will date back to the class of 1915.” The University of Richmond, tried through poverty, war, and poverty again, was reborn in the shape of an up-to-date and progressive institution. They brought bricks with them from the old college so students could walk on the same beloved paths they had left—and those bricks still rest near Ryland Hall. But in the new school young women as well as young men could study the modern courses emerging in American higher education: political science, economics, education, sociology, and business administration.

In 1920, the two colleges and a newly strengthened law school fused into the University of Richmond. Women became members of the Board of Trustees and were admitted to the law school—as President Boatwright declared, “thus carrying forward another principle of democracy.”

Ninety years after its founding, the University of Richmond took the shape we recognize today. The fundamental organization and landscape have endured. Living memory stretches back that far as well, as I have learned in my travels meeting alumni throughout Virginia and across the nation over the last nine months. I have met one alumnus, a great grandnephew of our founding president, who recalls playing as a boy at the brand new campus in the 1910s. I have met men and women who attended Richmond or Westhampton during the Great Depression and others who were among the 1,300 students and alumni who served in World War II. I have met many who remember President Modlin with fondness, many who were here when the School of Business began in 1949, and many who attended University College—later to become our School of Continuing Studies—soon after it opened in 1962. There are many here today who were present in 1969 when the transformative

gift of \$50 million from the Robins family was announced to a jubilant audience—another moment when the University, in many respects, began anew.

We all know, too, of the remarkable work of my predecessors—Bruce Heilman, Richard Morrill, and William Cooper—because the evidence of their skill and dedication is all around us. I view their accomplishments with pride. They have set the bar high.

Of course, Richmond presidents are fortunate to have extraordinary partners in their work. I think of Robert Jepson, who established our pioneering School of Leadership Studies 15 years ago; of Carole and Marcus Weinstein, who most recently have made possible a new Center for International Education; and again of the Robins Family, whose most recent gifts, under the leadership of Claiborne Robins, Jr. and Ann Carol Marchant, are allowing us to build a new center for Westhampton College and complete the funding for a new campus stadium. Evidence of these partnerships and the support of many others are abundant in our landscape and in the strength of our programs.

Today, thanks to all those whom I've mentioned and countless others, we occupy a special place in American higher education, combining the intimacy of a liberal arts college with the creativity of a university. Our superb faculty win prestigious awards and research grants even as they remain dedicated to their students above all else. The staff is remarkable, both for their talent and for their commitment. We attract some of the best students from across the United States and from 70 other countries, and then send them back into the world where they do wonderful things.

There, in ten minutes or so, is the outline of the history of the University of Richmond we know best. That history is marked by constant change and continual progress. That history is compelling and it is ours.

But it is not the only history we inhabit and as we seek to shape our own time here, there is still more we should remember, and celebrate, and embody. If we go back to the frame building occupied by the struggling Baptists of 1830, we see a common purpose that stretches across ten generations to ourselves. 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 quieter stories that tell us something important about the enduring spirit of this place.

The first president of Richmond College, Robert Ryland, announced that his would be “a Baptist College in no narrow, bigoted sense. Pupils of every creed and of no creed have been, and will be, received on the same terms, and treated with equal justice and consideration.” Ryland and other Virginia Baptists understood the importance of such broad-mindedness all too well. For much of Virginia history, they had been viewed as a dangerous and disruptive minority, and persecuted harshly for practicing their faith.

Ryland himself, though a slaveholder, served for more than twenty-five years as minister to the First African Church in Richmond, with 2,000 members, most of them held in slavery. When asked why he would take on such work when others doubted the wisdom of ministering to those held in bondage, Ryland recalled that “I esteemed it a holy privilege to preach the gospel to the poor; and while the negroes were in bondage and forbidden by law to have colored ministers, and even to assemble by themselves for worship, I felt that it would be an awful crime for any white preacher to decline such an opportunity.” African Americans in Richmond used their church to create strong, vibrant, and independent leaders of their own. After emancipation Ryland, stepping down as president, opened a school for freed people in Richmond when other white people were openly hostile to any such effort.

Ryland was true to his words in other ways. When other schools around the nation, many more famous than ours, maintained quotas or excluded Jews altogether from attending their institutions, from its early days Richmond College welcomed Jewish students. When Frederic Boatwright became president his friend and neighbor Rabbi Edward N. Calish led the closing prayer. Our honor system was rejuvenated in the 1930s under the leadership of local student Edwin Cohen, who went on to a distinguished career in public service.

Meanwhile, the University welcomed people from abroad. In 1909 Ah-Fong Yeung, who had come from China at age 15, graduated from Richmond and went to Columbia for his law degree before returning to China to teach. (Seventy-five years later his grandson would come to the University from the People’s Republic of China.) Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, dozens of students from China studied at Richmond. By the 1950s, young women from Brazil and Norway proclaimed themselves very happy at Westhampton and in 1960 Abdullah Mina, from Lebanon, wrote powerful columns for the *Collegian* that predicted much of the world history that would follow. “No matter how many differences there are among peoples of the world,” he told his fellow

students, “their basic needs and aspirations are the same—freedom, well-being, and peace.”

But, closer to home, the fundamental unity and equality of people had long been denied. Although the Baptists had identified themselves early in their history as enemies of slavery, they, like virtually all other white Southerners, had accommodated themselves to the institution by the time Richmond College was founded. For a hundred years after emancipation, for five generations, the city, state, and region where we live demanded racial exclusion. Black people had occupied the land on which we gather today, first as enslaved people and then as free people making their own way in a hard place. When the beautiful new buildings of Ralph Adams Cram began to go up in 1911, workers walked over from Zion Town, less than a mile to our west, where they had established their own settlement after freedom.

But African Americans could not be students here, just as they could not be students at the historically white public universities of Virginia. Black Virginians never accepted the injustice they confronted and worked throughout the 1920s and 1930s to win simple justice. The coming of World War II opened a new opportunity and here in Richmond as elsewhere African Americans pressed white Americans to live up to the claims they made about the nation’s purpose. And some University of Richmond students supported them in these early days of struggle.

In 1943, a *Collegian* editorial asked about segregation on the buses of the city: “Is there any good reason why the Negro should not sit with the whites? After all, Negroes are American too—as American as you or I. . . . Their sons, brothers and husbands are fighting and dying along side of their white brothers on the fighting fronts. These Negro men are fighting for what they believe—that this country is a democracy in practice, as well as ideals.”

The next year, in 1944, Russell Jones, according to the *Collegian* “a student at Virginia Union and one of the city’s outstanding young Negro leaders,” came to Westhampton College to help recruit for the Richmond Inter-collegiate Council. That Council, supported by eight colleges including Richmond and Westhampton, was open, it announced, to everyone who wanted to “bring about a better understanding between all races.” After his talk, though, Jones was not allowed to eat with the white students even though they wished him to. The students petitioned the Rector and the president to remove any prohibition, but for another twenty years the university, like others across Virginia, public and private, steadfastly resisted integration.

But then things began to change, slowly. In 1964, the first black students enrolled in evening classes at the predecessor to our School of Continuing Studies, then only two years old. In 1968, the first African American student to live in a dormitory here on campus, Barry Greene, enrolled and was welcomed. After that, the number of black students at the University slowly increased. Slowly, too, we have attracted Americans from other under-represented groups, from American families whose origins lie in China or India or Vietnam, in Mexico or Guatemala, in Bulgaria or the Ukraine.

But we all know there is more to be done to make the University of Richmond all it can be, and should be, and must be. Our past and our traditions serve as our guides as we continue this important work in making ourselves more self-aware, inclusive, and generous.

From the beginning, in various ways, this university has been about expanding opportunity. As early as 1836, half the students were what were then called “beneficiaries,” recipients of scholarships.

For the next 172 years, the University of Richmond would open doors for students of need. Whether they came to campus as day students, as Claiborne Robins did in 1927 or Marcus Weinstein did in 1946, or whether they came from distant farmsteads to live in the dormitories and work in the dining halls, or whether they came from the other side of the world, we have opened doors—though sometimes only after a great deal of knocking. Once here, students of all backgrounds have changed our university immeasurably for the better. In 1895, a critic of co-education warned in a college publication that the effects of admitting women would be “lasting, and exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to eradicate.” He was right about the lasting effects of co-education, but wrong to worry, of course. Now we need to open the doors of opportunity even wider.

We have an exciting opportunity before us to do so—even if that opportunity comes wrapped in the somewhat dull packaging of something called a “strategic plan.” Our faculty, staff, students, and alumni are now shaping that plan, refining, revising, and giving it flesh and blood. The plan has five principles and those principles have crystallized out of hundreds, maybe thousands, of conversations and from eloquent responses to the question I asked all around the campus and the country over the last year: what do we want the University of Richmond to be known for as we move forward?

And the five principles emerge directly from our history. Accordingly, one of the areas on which we will focus intently in the next five years is diversity—on integrating students, faculty, and staff of different backgrounds, experiences, and ideas more fully into one community. In the global community for which we are preparing the young men and women who study here, the old boundaries between peoples are shifting. We are all interconnected and interdependent, and that needs to be part of the experience our students have here. But we are not merely reacting to external forces in promoting diversity. We are stewarding one of the best parts of our legacy—the commitment to opportunity and a tradition of welcome that has characterized this institution in many ways for generations. We have work to do to expand that tradition. And we will do it.

We will also focus on affordability, because that is both one of our oldest traditions and one of our greatest needs for the future. We are one of only one percent of the schools in the United States that does not ask how much money you have when we admit you and then meets all the need you demonstrate. Generations of young men and women who have come here on scholarships have led lives of remarkable achievement and they have given back much to this place. It is astounding to think about the ability that would have been squandered if we had not been able to enroll them, and it is sobering to think about how different the University might be today without the support they have been able to give us. While it will be challenging to maintain and expand this tradition of affordability, we will do it.

We want to bring students of all backgrounds here not just because we believe they have something to offer this community, of course, but because we know we have something important to offer them. Two of our other key priorities will focus on integrating more fully what is already special about the Richmond experience.

Focusing on our core academic enterprise, we will integrate higher education in a way that is done nowhere else. We can do so because each of our schools is strong, a worthy ally of the rest. We will offer our students avenues to connect the arts and sciences with business. We will invite law professors to teach undergraduates and invite law and graduate students to take advantage of the rich offerings elsewhere in the university. We will encourage our students of traditional college age to take classes with those decades older. We will use our leadership school as a model and catalyst of engaged interdisciplinary work. Just as the founding Baptists created a liberal arts college rather than a seminary, understanding that broad learning was necessary to live in the world,

we can build from our unique configuration of schools a broader academic experience than is possible at most liberal arts institutions. And we will do it.

We will also focus on offering an integrated and distinctive student experience outside the classroom. Our traditions here are clear. This place has always been about human connection, about educating the entire person. Our size provides for a small and close community. The landscape we occupy and the buildings we enjoy are of a human scale, nurturing and sheltering. One student, a young Civil War veteran, noted in his diary in 1868, “How strong and dear are the ties that are formed at College.” That has not changed, and Westhampton College and Richmond College hold out unique opportunities for mentoring and fellowship, just as they have for nearly a hundred years in our enduring coordinate system. Our remarkable network of international collaborations, decades in the making, brings us students from all over the world and grows every day. Our laboratories and research opportunities are accessible to undergraduates in a way rare anywhere else. The office of the chaplaincy provides a sense of personal care and support and the spiritual sustenance that has always characterized the University of Richmond. Our athletic teams embody what is best about intercollegiate sports. There are ways to weave these elements together, to shape a coherent and cohesive whole that is more than the sum of its parts, to create a place of joyful learning. And we will do that.

Finally, we will focus on preparing our students for lives as engaged citizens—and the institution as a whole will become a more fully engaged citizen in the community where we live, a community that has shaped our identity in fundamental ways.

Much of what we have we have because Richmonders have given it—through decades of hard work as well as through generous gifts. The university likewise has given much back over the last 178 years, educating tens of thousands of Virginians and creating many more Virginians from those who have come to us from elsewhere and then chose to stay and call the Commonwealth home. In the nineteenth century, our students volunteered their time in the city’s Alms House, Old Soldiers’ Home, and State Penitentiary. Today, they are engaged in public health and the public schools, in community development, in pro bono legal work and much else that is often visible only to those they help. We will sustain and build upon our tradition of making this a university for Richmond as well as of Richmond.

Generations of Richmonders have bequeathed us a beautiful place, a landscape that provides the spaces for all that we do. Our generation's responsibility is to steward this place in ways fitting with the care shown by those who have come before us and then to fulfill our responsibility to future generations. For us, that stewardship must include thinking about the larger environmental impact of the decisions we make and by educating responsible environmental citizens. We will.

Achieving our aspirations in these five areas will be hard but thrilling work. It will require all of us associated with the University to contribute our energy, our ideas, our honesty, our good will, our imagination. But there is a tradition of that here, too.

It will be an exciting adventure and I look forward to pursuing it with all of you. Thank you for this opportunity—and for your faith in our shared future.