

THE JEFFERSON IMAGE

FATHER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA

In March 1809, Thomas Jefferson rode away from the White House never to return. He was 65 years old and had completed two terms as president of the United States, and wanted nothing more than to retire to his beloved home at Monticello and be a farmer. When he died 17 years later, he left instructions on the three accomplishments he wished placed on his tombstone. He asked to be remembered for his authorship of the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, both of which he had authored as a young man. The third was the endeavor which filled those final years, as the “father” of the University of Virginia.

Early Plans

As a member of the Committee of Revisers, Jefferson submitted in 1778 a Bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge. Jefferson saw an educated citizenry as the greatest protection of their rights and liberties. The system devised by Jefferson provided for primary schools and colleges for the older students, with the better students eventually attending the College of William & Mary. There was resistance to this plan because William & Mary was not central to the state and was controlled by Episcopalians. Also, the requirement that local taxes support the primary schools was not popular.

While he was governor and a member of the Board of Visitors in 1779, Jefferson did establish a school of history and a law school at the College. He was concerned that students left Virginia for better schools. However, the conflict over location and the Episcopal influence continued. Once Jefferson left for France in 1784, the issue of public education was set aside

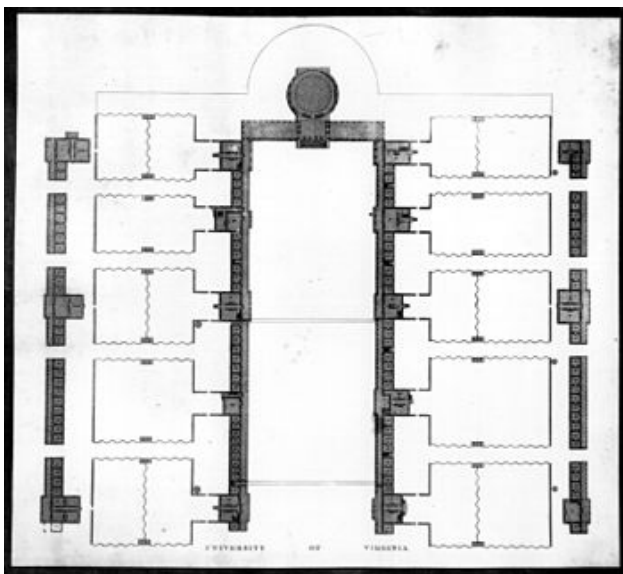
Central College

Creation of an academy in Albemarle County probably had its genesis before Jefferson left for France, but over 3 decades would pass before it was seri-

ously pursued. A charter was obtained in 1803, but it was not until 1814 that the five surviving trustees took a renewed interest in moving forward. Apparently, Jefferson stopped by chance at the stone tavern where the trustees were meeting and wound up on the reformed Board of Trustees. Jefferson’s subsequent letter to the chairman Peter Carr on his detailed plans for public education and his sketch of a series of pavilions for the different schools was widely published.

It is likely Jefferson was already looking beyond the limited purposes of a local academy toward his grander view of a great University. He had written

Joseph Priestley in 1800 that “we wish to establish, in the upper and healthier country, and more centrally for the state, a University..” Later in 1816, he described his vision, that “instead of one immense building, to have a small one for every professorship, arranged at proper distances around a square, to admit extension, connected by a piazza, so they may go dry from one school to another. This village form is preferable to a single great building..”



Jefferson’s “academical village” from the engraving by Peter Maverick 1825

Jefferson’s ally in the legislature was Joseph Cabell, the senator from Albemarle County who secured a bill for establishing Central College on February 14, 1816. Jefferson

struggled with the lack of funds through the whole construction process. Cabell was to be an untiring supporter of Jefferson’s vision. He took over the petition for funds and the request to convert the Academy into a college.

At the next session, a bill for “a complete system of native education, and embracing a university” was passed by the House of Delegates but failed to get Senate approval. Jefferson had already prepared drawings for the layout of Central College and on October 6, 1817, in the presence of Jefferson, James Madison and President James Monroe, among “a large

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Father of the University of Virginia

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company of citizens," the cornerstone for Pavilion VII was set. Shortly after the cornerstone was laid, three other buildings were scheduled for erection and the task of obtaining professors had begun. Financing remained a constant problem, but Jefferson was anxious to get the buildings up and professors obligated in order that Central College could be considered for the new university.

In the bill passed on February 21, 1818, the second part of Jefferson's plan, that of the district colleges or academies was abandoned, but support was given for the local schools and for a new state university. Jefferson had included in his bill for general education the adoption of Central College as the new university, but this was ignored by the General Assembly, although the establishment of a new state university was authorized, and a commission was designated to select a site.

University of Virginia

The General Assembly had designated one commissioner from each senatorial district in the state to select a site for the new university. The commission met at Rockfish Gap on August 1, 1818. The three contenders were Washington College, Staunton and Central College. By this time, the buildings at Central College and the cash assets and endowments, either collected or promised, exceeded the value of Washington College. Jefferson was chosen as chairman of the commission. He had prepared a detailed analysis of the population distribution in the state as well as a map to show that Central College was closer to the center point of the population and to its geographical center.

Jefferson's description became the report of the commission when it approved Central College as the site for the new University. Jefferson's design featured a wide expanse of lawn, flanked by two parallel rows of buildings. At intervals in the rows Jefferson set pavilions, two story structures which were occupied by the professors and where the students attended class. Between the pavilions were the student rooms which opened onto a colonnaded arcade that ran the length of the row and protected the students from the weather as they walked to the pavilions for class and meals. This design permitted the row to be extended for additional pavilions and student rooms as the population of the school increased. Parallel to these rows separated by gardens were the "ranges" of addi-

tional student rooms.

On the open north end of the two rows, he would place his magnificent Rotunda, a domed structure modeled on the Pantheon in Rome.

Cabell was still concerned that final approval might not pass the General Assembly. Washington College continued to dispute Jefferson's calculation that showed Charlottesville as the center of the state. There were also the delegates from Tidewater who continued to support William and Mary. They argued that Charlottesville was only a small village and would be unattractive to the new professors.

In spite of ill health, Cabell remained in Richmond for the holidays and encouraged others from remote areas to do the same to be present when the General Assembly reconvened. The location of the University of Virginia was finally approved by the General Assembly on January 18, 1819. The first board of visitors was Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, John H. Cocke, Joseph C. Cabell, Chapman Johnson, James Breckenridge and Robert B. Taylor. Jefferson was appointed rector.

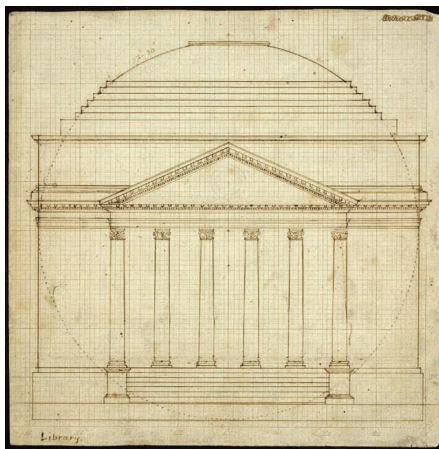
The Marquis de Lafayette dined with Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe in the unfinished Rotunda in 1824. Here, Lafayette first named Jefferson "Father of the University of Virginia".

The University opened for classes in 1825 with a faculty of eight, five of whom were found in England and three in the United States and a student body numbering sixty-eight. Instruction was offered in ancient languages, modern languages, mathematics, moral philosophy, natural philosophy, chemistry, law, and medicine.

Before his death, Jefferson committed the care of the University to James Madison, and recalled "the friendship which has subsisted between us, now half a century." After Jefferson's death, Madison became rector of the University, the last of the three Virginia presidents who had laid its cornerstone in 1817. He always gave credit to Jefferson as the creator of the University that "bears the stamp of his genius, and will be a noble monument of his fame."

In 1976, the American Institute of Architects deemed the University "the proudest achievement of American architecture in the past 200 years."

By Richard E. Dixon



Jefferson's line drawing of the Rotunda 1819