COMMEMORATION, CONTROVERSY, AND CAMPUS BUILDINGS:

A CASE STUDY—VIRGINIA TECH, 1997–2020

ABSTRACT

Part historical reconstruction and part memoir by a participant observer, this article reveals the path that led, between 1997 and 2020, to three changes in names of campus residence halls at Virginia Tech. Major spurs to such reconsiderations of the names of campus buildings at many schools over the past decade were the shooting murders at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston in June 2015, the "Unite the Right" violence in Charlottesville in August 2017, and the public murder of a Black man by a uniformed police officer in Minneapolis in May 2020. The particulars of the Virginia Tech story were more local and began earlier—in 1997–1998 and 2004–2005—but converged with the national narrative in 2020.

At institutions of higher education, leaders and stakeholders tend to notice birthdays denominated in half or full centuries but pay less mind to quarter-century marks, and Virginia Tech did not do a lot to take notice of its official 125th anniversary in 1997. Yet some events associated with that anniversary, whether entirely deliberate or utterly accidental, reverberated through the closing weeks of 1997 and on down through the next two decades and more.

      Those were related to a special class on the history of the school, itself unquestionably

intentional, for which students were bidden each week to go in groups to Special Collections and explore one category or another of materials, including the yearbook, *The Bugle*. An entirely unanticipated discovery by one group of students in October launched a multi-decade series of protests and reports about the names of campus buildings, one in particular, Lee Hall, a capacious residence hall, built in 1966 and named in 1968 for a longtime (1896–1946) professor of electrical engineering, Claudius Lee (1872–1962). Student protests drawing upon the 1997 discovery—about one individual, his representation in the 1896 yearbook, and the fact that his name adorned a prominent campus structure—originated in 1997, recurred in 2004, and erupted once again in 2020.

Over the past decade and more, a great many institutions have faced calls to change the names of campus structures and other features. Major spurs to such reconsiderations were the shooting deaths at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston in June 2015, the "Unite the Right" violence in Charlottesville in August 2017, and the public murder of a Black man by a uniformed police officer in Minneapolis in May 2020. The particulars of the Virginia Tech story were more local and began earlier—in 1997–1998 and 2004–2005—but converged with the national narrative in 2020.

ICONOGRAPHY AND CONTROVERSY, 1997–1998

Students in the class "History of Virginia Tech" were tasked with going to Special Collections, in teams of three or four of five, selecting from whatever category of materials was to be consulted in a particular week, finding items that struck them as illuminating, then reporting back to their classmates what they had found regarding both substance and possible significance—at

the same time, looking for possible topics for fuller exploration in a short research paper.

One group, perhaps the first people in years to have opened and examined the second *Bugle* ever published, that for 1896, reported in October to the class on a page (101) they had come across featuring a campus group that called itself the "K.K.K." Its members included a graduating senior (and the yearbook editor), Claudius Lee, who identified himself as its president, or rather the "father of terror," with other officers sporting titles like the "right hand of terror" and mere members "angels of terror."

Was this Lee, they inquired, the same person after whom a very large campus residence hall on Washington Street was named? It turned out to be the very same Lee, who, after a long career as an illustrious member of the engineering faculty, was celebrated in the 1960s by having his name put on a new building.

Another student in the class, Cordel Faulk, wrote an op-ed on the subject for the *Collegiate Times*, the undergraduate daily published at Virginia Tech. Ian Zack, the higher education writer for the *Roanoke Times*, picked the story up, and on November 3 his account appeared on the front page, top of the fold, in huge font, as "Grand old man, or the Tech KKK's 'Father of Terror'?" From there it soon went to the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, the *New York Times*, and elsewhere.

Alerted the previous day that the *Roanoke Times* story was coming, and concerned that it might necessitate "de-naming" Lee Hall, President Paul Torgersen and his able chief of staff, Carole Nickerson, appointed an ad hoc committee of three—two members of the faculty plus the graduate student representative to the Board of Visitors—to advise him. Reporting back within the week that had been allotted, the committee provided an enhanced collection of relevant materials from the years around 1896, traced the history of early Black students at Virginia Tech,

and suggested a broad range of possible actions.

WHITE TERRORISTS, BLACK TARGETS

Most students at Virginia Tech a century and more ago came from somewhere in Virginia, and a typical way of grouping themselves was to organize clubs whose members came from various local areas. Claudius Lee came from Pittsylvania County—the Danville area, Virginia's deepest South, whether in the 1880s or the 1960s. Having lived there during his childhood, he was quite possibly present as an eleven-year-old, together with his father, when a famous contrived racial incident in 1883 occurred that was designed for, and proved fabulously successfully at, bringing to an absolute end a biracial regime, a Black–White coalition called the Readjusters, that had dominated politics in the city of Danville and across the state of Virginia for the previous few years.

In the one week that the committee members had to prepare their report, among the material they came across was another page (108), this one on the Pittsylvania Club, of which Lee was also a leading member. That page declared the group's "motto"—"Hang 'em"—and, for an accompanying visual, presented an obvious lynching, a depiction in the abstract of just such an occurrence, a series of images, first just the boots, then a partial image, then the entire body. Among the titles of the club's members, the current president (each serving a single semester) was the "high arch fiend," and the vice-president "junior arch fiend." The four "past arch fiends" included Claudius Lee.

In the minds of the three ad hoc committee members, those two pages of the 1896 *Bugle*, individually and in combination, unambiguously promoted a domestic terrorist approach to life.

The KKK page—the only page typically referenced in any subsequent discussion of the matter—called forth the organization that, especially in its first incarnation in the years around 1870, embodied the use of rape and assassination, quite aside from the incineration of Black churches and Black schools, as social and political weapons. The lynching page appeared to condone—in fact celebrate—the awful act, which was carried out with particular frequency precisely in the decade of the 1896 *Bugle*'s publication.

The ad hoc committee began its work without any guidance from developments on other campuses. At that early time, the many examples from the twenty-first century—including those at the University of Virginia or at Washington and Lee University—lay years in the future. Committee members had no knowledge of what even now seems the singular previous such instance, at the University of Oklahoma in the 1980s. But that early sequence, when it came to light later on, illustrated how change might be resisted and then how it might be achieved. One prominent building on campus commemorated Edwin DeBarr—perhaps the leading patriarch in the University of Oklahoma's early decades, starting in the 1890s, but then a leading light in the 1920s of the Ku Klux Klan in Oklahoma.

An early effort to remove DeBarr's name was turned back. But a change of institutional leadership a few years later led to a contrasting outcome. Since that time, when the name reverted to "Chemistry Building," a prominent sign out front has explained why DeBarr had during one period been seen as such a compelling choice for commemoration—and then why, many years later, the case for removing his name had in turn seemed so compelling.

THE REPORTS OF 1997–1998

The committee's November 1997 report, to quote from it, "conveys the committee's reflections on the recent revelations about the 1890s, together with ways that the university might consider responding" in the 1990s.

In that light, committee members adopted an approach that pointed up a dual history on race at Virginia Tech. On the one hand were the two pages in the 1896 *Bugle* evoking Claudius Lee's abysmal orientation on matters of race. In a striking counterpoint were the twin facts that, among the eleven historically-White land-grant schools in the former Confederate South, VPI had been the first to enroll—and subsequently the first to award a degree to—a *Black undergraduate*, dating from Irving Linwood Peddrew III's enrollment in 1953 and, Peddrew having chosen not to return for his senior year, Charlie Lee Yates's graduation in 1958.

The ad hoc committee's advice was not to be publicized, the president had made clear to its members, and anyway was not to comprise an actual list of unified recommendations. Committee members therefore realized that they had no need to speak with a single voice as they offered ideas, including what to do about the name of Lee Hall. Not only was the committee not authorized to recommend a change of name, members felt conflicted on the matter, recoiling from keeping the name and, at the same time, resisting an easy sanitizing of the past by erasing a particular contested part of it. In the end, the administration did not propose a change of name to the Board of Visitors, the institution's ultimate authority on such matters. But even as the committee did its work, the president set in motion the hiring of a new "vice president for multicultural affairs," and some months later Dr. Benjamin Dixon took up the post.

The report did not become public until a few years later, and seems still not readily available, so its content has generally remained a matter of speculation and presumption. But its guidance ranged over a variety of what it called "options." Specifying the names Irving Peddrew

and Charlie Yates, for example, it spoke of "the honorary degree option." As for people who might be considered for commemoration at campus buildings, Lee or no Lee, it identified three, among them Peddrew and Yates.

Suggestions also included ways to enhance initiatives dating from some point earlier in the 1990s. The Black Cultural Center, which had opened in Squires Student Center in 1991, might see its mission and resources enhanced. Regarding a curricular enhancement, a "Black Studies option" could build upon a minor in the field, which had become available two years earlier, and offer a full major. (The minor gained a new name, "Africana Studies," in 2005, but a degree program has yet to materialize.) The report went on to point out: "Associated with the option of establishing a Black Studies program would be recruitment of more black faculty—though recruitment of more black faculty and establishment of a Black Studies [major], while clearly related, stand separately."

With reference to the proposed option of characterizing Lee Hall instead as "Diversity Hall" (with or without retaining the name Lee), the report gave an overview of the history of the Klan. In its first incarnation, in the years around 1870, the KKK had targeted Black southerners—their *schools*, their churches, their political power. In the second, in the years around 1920, it had gone national and broadened the objects of its wrath and terror to include, said the report, "people who practiced what Klan members perceived as aberrant religious faiths (Catholics, Jews) and aberrant sexual behavior." So the committee suggested that "Diversity Hall" might house offices of such groups as Hillel, the Black Graduate Student Association, and the Lesbian, Bisexual, and Gay Association.

A follow-up report (in February 1998) adopted a rhetoric of more direct advocacy and addressed continuing institutional shortcomings regarding racial inclusion. It made specific

suggestions as to how Admissions might more aggressively recruit Black students, starting with William Fleming High School in the nearby city of Roanoke.

Both reports expressly pointed the university toward a worldview antithetical to the one depicted in the newly-discovered pages of the 1896 *Bugle*. Over the years, a number of the committee's suggestions came to pass: one residence hall named in honor of both Peddrew and Yates; an honorary degree for Peddrew. But nothing was done of the sort that any member saw as necessary regarding Lee Hall. And the name remained.

REDRESS AND RECURRENCE, 2003–2005

The year 2003 brought a Black Alumni Reunion that celebrated the pioneer Black students of the 1950s. Fifty years had passed since Irving Peddrew stepped onto campus in 1953 (and 47 years since he had last been near the place). Four of the initial six—Lindsay Cherry, Charlie Yates, Matthew Winston, and Essex Finney—had all overlapped in their time at VPI, but never since then had they all been together in the same place, let alone on the Virginia Tech campus.

Also in 2003 came the dedication of a new residence hall, just down the hill from Lee Hall. Because the building was new and had not yet been given any name, nothing had to be taken down in order for the new names to go up. Speaking at the ceremony were the two men whose names the structure would thereafter carry: Irving Peddrew, the first African American to come to campus as a degree-seeking student, and Dr. Charlie Yates, the first to stay for all four years and complete his degree. The juxtaposition was striking, as the man from the 1890s and the two men from the 1950s each claimed a significant—and adjacent—place on campus, thereby high-lighting the very duality in Tech's history that the 1997 report to President Torgersen had

identified. One committee member from 1997, in particular, took delight in imagining the three men, each with arms crossed, staring from one building to the other, one man now required to share campus space with the other two.

But the name Lee Hall remained. The events of fall 1997 never went away; the images in the 1896 *Bugle* continued to intrude upon the campus political culture. The matter drew the concern and attention of three consecutive Virginia Tech presidents.

Meanwhile, it was widely—and erroneously—understood that the ad hoc committee had concluded the 1896 "K.K.K." to be a student hoax. Such reassurance had been earnestly sought in the aftermath of the 1997 revelations, but in its report the president's committee had italicized its express response to such yearnings: *"Such reassurance the committee is unable to supply."*

After the initial scrutiny in the fall of 1997, the next chief episode occurred in the fall of 2004 (the year after the dedication of Peddrew-Yates Residence Hall), when a new cohort of students, spurred to action by a new collection of racist incidents on campus, protested the name Lee Hall, with a new university president in office. Assigned the task of exploring the issue this second time was a standing group, the Commission on Equal Opportunity and Diversity, chaired during 2004–2005 by Raymond V. Plaza. His group held a number of hearings and then in early 2005 produced an extensive list of recommendations, some to be addressed right away, others less soon, and still others later on.

The bigger recommendations had to do with offering Irving Peddrew an honorary degree (as "recommended," it was said, in the 1997 report) and adopting "a new name" for an unnamed residence hall adjacent to Peddrew-Yates ("to complement Peddrew-Yates and counter the impact of the Lee Hall name"). Thus the 2005 report did not urge a change of name for Lee Hall; the name remained. Lesser, short-term recommendations were variously implemented (at least

temporarily) or not. Their larger, longer-term counterparts never were, at least before another new president of the university, Dr. Timothy D. Sands, had moved in 2014 into The Grove, the on-campus president's home.

TOWARD RESOLUTION, 2020

By mid-2020, so fifteen years after the 2005 report, many things had changed. Early in his presidency, President Sands put out a new welcome mat. Implementing one of the key suggestions from 1997 and one of the larger recommendations from 2005, Dr. Sands saw to it that, at the 2016 university commencement (sixty years after leaving the school), Irving Peddrew found himself holding an honorary degree.

Lee Hall remained, though President Sands was predisposed to ridding the campus of what were ever more widely perceived as *un*welcome mats. The murder of a Black man on the streets of Minneapolis by a uniformed law officer in broad daylight transformed the political and cultural landscape; George Floyd's death made change suddenly far more likely in a great many places across America. Moreover, communications technology had developed to where rising senior Jimmy Kaindu could post a petition to de-name Lee Hall and, within a matter of days, see it attract many thousands of signatures. Supporters included students who had served as resident advisors in Lee Hall and knew how much unhappiness and pain the name had often caused.

As in 2004, the president in 2020 had a standing group to which he could direct the task of exploring the matter and making recommendations. In fall 2017, in the aftermath of the events that summer in Charlottesville, President Sands had appointed a Council on Virginia Tech History. On the one hand, the Council had discretion to consider a wide range of dimensions of

race on campus. On the other, it had responsibility for revisiting the full history of the institution in the long run-up to Tech's official 150th anniversary in 2022.

Two dimensions of the Claudius Lee saga became central for the Council in making its recommendations. For one, members recognized, this is a residence hall, and hundreds of young lives every year engage inside that particular structure in the process of becoming who they will be; it is their home. And two, among all the White supremacists of his era, Lee stood out precisely because of those two ineradicable pages; they could scarcely become undiscovered.

The Council on Virginia Tech History expeditiously canvassed the situation and reached a commitment that indeed the time had come for the name Claudius Lee to come down off the Washington Street residence hall. More than that, having developed a short list of strong candidates for a name (or multiple names) that might replace Professor Lee's, the Council selected Janie and William Hoge to recommend to the university's Commemorative Tributes Committee—which subsequently accepted the nomination for recommendation to the Board of Visitors.

JANIE ELIZABETH PATTERSON HOGE (1887–1960) AND
WILLIAM HARRIS HOGE SR. (1883–1964)

The Hoges (pronounced with a long O and a hard G) were an elderly Black couple who had provided room and board for all eight pioneer African Americans who were enrolled at Virginia Tech between 1953 and 1960. The Hoges' home had been located on Clay Street, next to the First Baptist Church between Penn and Wharton Streets, a one-mile walk from the engineering buildings where the eight had most of their classes. Whatever the weather during fall, winter, or

spring, the eight students, barred from living or dining on campus, had to walk all the way home and back for a hot lunch any day that featured both morning and afternoon classes and labs or drills.

Lindsay Cherry, one of the eight, had been searching for some way—or ways—to honor the Hoges. He had in mind a named scholarship, as well as a commemorative marker somewhere that might describe them, he proposed, as "offering love, compassion, and guidance to those young trailblazers who were in search of a better life, for themselves and for others."

In the end, Mr. and Mrs. Hoge seemed a simply compelling choice for the structure to be henceforth only formerly known as Lee Hall. The Hoges were crucial to the survival and success of the pioneer African American students at Virginia Polytechnic Institute. From 1953 through 1960, the couple hosted a small number of young men who—in an updated, 1950s version of "separate but equal"—had been admitted as engineering undergraduates but who, on racial grounds, were denied rooms on campus.

The building long named for Claudius Lee was a residence hall, precisely the kind of structure that the pioneer Black students were not permitted to live in, the very reason they boarded with the Hoges. In the 2020s, it houses two Living Learning Communities, both of them in engineering, the area of study that the students staying with the Hoges were required to follow if they wished to enroll—and remain enrolled—at Virginia Tech.

Moreover, the Hoge name represents the broad array of other people who, in so many roles, throughout the years, have, invisibly and unsung, supported the campus's more obvious and recognized functions—that is, fostered the work of the institution's official constituents, the faculty and students. Doing so, the name acknowledges the range of close connections between campus and community.

Most of all, it brings into focus a core way in which the institution, long exclusive, has become more inclusive. Across four centuries, racial privilege or proscription has been at the center of social, economic, legal, and political life in America in general and in Virginia in particular. William and Janie Hoge came across center stage in the historical drama of Virginia Tech at the very moment that they could facilitate an end to the most intractable barrier to inclusion of all.

When growing up in the 1890s (at about the same time that Claudius Lee was a student at Virginia Polytechnic Institute), neither of the Hoges had a lot of schooling, Mr. Hoge having gone through the third grade, Mrs. Hoge through grade seven. Well into their adulthood, the U.S. census indicated that Mr. Hoge was able to write a little but not read. In the twilight of their lives, he and his wife played key roles in opening up an institution of higher education to a much younger generation of Black Virginians.

PRO-SLAVERY AND ANTI-BLACK:

FROM BARRINGER HALL TO WHITEHURST HALL

Other names than Claudius Lee's had also surfaced for interrogation, though none with so much scrutiny. Having dispatched the matter of Lee, the Council focused on one other name, Paul Brandon Barringer, M.D., who had served as president of VPI between 1907 and 1913. (The 1997 and 1998 reports had both alluded to Barringer but not named him, nor had his record been explored then in any detail.)

As in the case of Lee, a new residence hall built in the 1960s bore Barringer's name. Once closely examined, Dr. Barringer's lectures and publications on Black southerners,

especially in the years around 1900, revealed themselves virulently anti-Black and relentlessly proslavery—and not remotely susceptible to being written off as somehow ambiguous in their intent or the product of a twenty-something whose views might have grown less reactionary in his more mature years.

Dr. Barringer first gained widespread fame as a result of a speech he delivered in 1900 at a medical convention in Charleston, South Carolina, the original home of secession in 1860. Asked to speak on "the influence of heredity upon the negro" (he had urged some such topic), Barringer gave a talk that appeared in print under the title *The American Negro: His Past and Future*.

Adding the weight of scientific authority to beliefs already widely shared, Barringer enlightened his audience, there and elsewhere, with the truth as he chose to see it and say it. His characterizations of Africans and African Americans were nothing if not White supremacist, pro-slavery, anti-Black: "The ages of degradation under which he ["the negro"] was formed and the fifty centuries of historically recorded savagery with which he came to us [i.e., White southerners] can not be permanently influenced by one or two centuries of enforced correction if the correcting force [enslavement] be withdrawn" (5).

Barringer's ideological orientation regarding race is revealed as well in the following quotations: "If you scratch a negro you will find a savage" (13). "But we all know that we had a good negro in this country once, and that was in slave times" (20). "Thirty-five years have passed since the negro changed from the condition of a slave to that of a freedman. In every part of the South, it is the opinion of every man of unbiased mind, that the second generation is infinitely worse than the first. . . . The question for us to-day, then, and the question of questions for the South, is, 'What is the cause of the change and what can be done to remedy the evil?'"

(15). In a passage that begins with "And now to the remedy," he wrote: "The people of the South [White people, of course] must act. First they must remove the negro from politics" (19). Indeed, one after another, former Confederate states were, at that very time, seeking the outcome Barringer was proposing, with Virginia about to join them.

Barringer concluded *The American Negro* with the following plea regarding the nature, purpose, and administration of schooling appropriate for all Black residents of the South: "The temporary elevation produced by the discipline of slavery is not being maintained by the efforts we have made at common school education, in the hands of his own race, [so] we must at once, if we would save the negro and the South, try something else. I would finally urge that we try henceforth an education of trade or industrial type, given at the hands of well-chosen white teachers, who will teach them to respect, to obey and to work" (23). In that last phrase, Barringer repeated exactly the language he had used in identifying "the three essentials" in "the training of all slaves": "to respect, to obey and to work" (11).

As in the case of Claudius Lee, Paul Brandon Barringer's deliberate public presentation stood out from among his contemporaries at VPI. Having determined Barringer's name to be inappropriate and unacceptable for adorning any aspect of any educational enterprise in the twenty-first century, the Council on Virginia Tech History swiftly adopted a recommendation that his name, too, come off the residence hall that had borne it for a half-century—in fact ever since the year VPI first actually recruited Black students, in 1966. (And by then, Black students were living and eating on campus and could major in any discipline the institution offered, which by then included the humanities.) In Barringer's place, the Council offered all of the remaining names that had been finalists for what had long been Lee Hall.

The Commemorative Tributes Committee selected James Leslie Whitehurst Jr. (1940–

2013), class of 1963, for recommendation to the Board of Visitors. Whitehurst had enrolled in 1959, just after the last among the first six Black pioneers had finished their time at Tech (two had graduated that year). Whitehurst and the one other Black student entering that year, Robert Garfield Wells, roomed with the Hoges their first year in Blacksburg—also the last year the couple were able to offer their home for lodging.

After one more year of living off campus, Whitehurst—bolstered by legal help—argued his way into a barracks room for his junior year, and never again were Black cadets required to live off campus. Whitehurst similarly challenged, again with success, the previous restriction that had kept Black juniors from attending their Ring Dance, a big event in an undergraduate's life at Tech. Building on the achievements of the six earlier Black students, Whitehurst forced the process of desegregation along, to the benefit of all subsequent African Americans who might attend Virginia Tech. During the dozen years after his graduation, Whitehurst served as a captain in the Air Force, completed law school at the University of Virginia, and was appointed in 1970 by Governor A. Linwood Holton to a four-year term as the first African American on the Virginia Tech Board of Visitors.

Being in a position to make policy for an institution that, two decades earlier, had never enrolled a Black student—and that only that year, 1970, had hired its first Black faculty—represented a remarkable transformation in the realm of race. Whitehurst himself, with great persistence and at considerable emotional cost, had pushed the institution forward in multiple ways. Barringer faithfully reflected key features of the past. Whitehurst, not Barringer, represented the institution's best aspirations for the future.

AUGUST 2000

On August 13, 2020, the executive committee of the Board of Visitors accepted the four recommendations from the Commemorative Tributes Committee regarding names and buildings. That very afternoon, workers stripped off the old names of Lee Hall and Barringer Hall and installed the new names, Hoge Hall and Whitehurst Hall. Days later, a new cohort of Virginia Tech undergraduates arrived in Blacksburg, and hundreds of them moved into the old halls with the new names.

No one could have foreseen the longer-term consequences of the special fall 1997 class on the university's history. The discovery of the names Hoge and Whitehurst, or even Peddrew and Yates, had taken something of an archaeological excavation through layers of lost history. The events of October and November 1997 finally led to a change in the name of Lee Hall, and suddenly Barringer Hall too was no more. Just as striking as the elimination of the old names was their replacement with the new ones.

Virginia Tech undergraduates in 1997 had started the process regarding the renaming of Lee Hall. Subsequent students, seven years later, raised the matter again. The student petition of 2020 made action more likely. As the university's official 150th anniversary approached, the events from the 125th reverberated on. Unheralded students and community people from generations earlier gained significant symbolic recognition. Successive cohorts of Tech students had fostered changes on their campus for future students, even as they folded back the pages of the past.

A phone call to Lindsay Cherry the afternoon of August 13, 2020, alerted him to one building's change of name from Lee to Hoge. Cherry was beyond incredulous. Next, a phone call to Irving Peddrew did not get through, but a text message soon reached him. His reply:

"WOW!!!"

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