

Frequently Asked Questions About President Ruscio's Recent Community Letter

On July 8, Washington and Lee President Kenneth P. Ruscio sent a letter to members of the University community, responding in detail to concerns that a group of W&L law students raised this past spring.

Since President Ruscio's letter was made public, reports appearing in the news media and distributed through social media have resulted in numerous misapprehensions and misconceptions.

The complete text of that letter is available on President Ruscio's web page at <http://go.wlu.edu/president>. Included in it are links to two additional web pages — a history of the Lee Chapel flags and a timeline of African Americans at Washington and Lee. Links to the president's two April messages on this subject to the University community are also on his web page.

The following FAQ addresses the key issues:

Have Confederate battle flags been removed from Lee Chapel?

Reproductions of eight Confederate regimental battle flags that were first placed in 1995 in the room with the statue by Edward Valentine, "The Recumbent Lee," have been removed. The American Civil War Museum will loan back *original* battle flags that had been displayed near the statue from 1930 to 1995, and they will be exhibited on a rotating basis in the Lee Chapel Museum, which is on the lower level of the chapel across from the Lee family crypt.

In his message to the community, President Ruscio wrote that in an educational setting such as a university, the appropriate place to display those flags is in the museum. There, those who wish to see them may do so, and the stories behind them can be properly told.

Questions about the appropriateness of the flag display near "The Recumbent Lee" are not new. Many individuals have expressed concerns about the flags in the past, especially after the authentic flags were replaced by reproductions in 1995.

Were the reproduction battle flags removed from Lee's tomb?

No. The reproductions had been hung near the statue at the rear of the chapel's auditorium, which is a primary indoor space for University events. Many people mistake the recumbent statue for Lee's tomb. It is not. The statue depicts Lee asleep on the battlefield, not in death. Mary Custis Lee, his wife, suggested depicting him asleep. Lee is buried in the crypt on the lower level of the chapel along with his family.

Will anything replace the flags in the statue chamber?

No. The room now looks as it was originally designed in 1883.

What is the purpose of Lee Chapel?

The chapel, which has two levels, serves many purposes. After it was built, from 1867 to 1868, during Lee's presidency, its primary function was to provide a meeting space for students and faculty. That remains one of its central roles; it is one of the largest indoor campus facilities and is used for many of the University's major events. It is not a consecrated religious space.

It is also the site of the Lee family crypt (on the lower level) and Edward Valentine's famous statue, "The Recumbent Lee" (on the upper level). In addition, a museum is located on the lower level, which was the site of Lee's office; the office remains as a part of the museum display. The museum's permanent exhibition, "Building and Rebuilding a Nation," traces the contributions to education of both Robert E. Lee, the president of Washington College from 1865 to 1870, and George Washington, a major benefactor in 1796. The chapel's history has made it a significant tourist destination.

The statue chamber was added to the rear of the upper level of the original chapel to house "The Recumbent Lee," which was unveiled in June 1883.

Did the University apologize for its and Lee's participation in slavery?

In late 2013, several months before the law student group voiced its concerns, President Ruscio had created a special working group to study the role of African Americans in the history of the University and to pay special attention to questions of slavery. Many other colleges and universities have explored these issues in recent years.

In his message of July 8, the president referred to "African Americans at Washington and Lee: A Timeline," a creation of the special working group. The timeline includes original documents detailing Washington College's inheritance in 1826 of between 73 and 84 enslaved people as part of an estate, showing that the college had benefited from their labor and, at times, their sale, up to 1852. President Ruscio wrote: "We acknowledge that this was a regrettable chapter of our history, and we must confront and try to understand this chapter." The working committee will continue to explore the topic and to expand the timeline.

Furthermore, in 2007, Emma Burris-Janssen, a senior at the time, wrote a history honors thesis, "An Inheritance of Slavery: The Tale of 'Jockey' John Robinson, His Slaves, and Washington College." [You may read that thesis here:](http://www.wlu.edu/Documents/president/AfricanAmerican/burris_paper.pdf)
http://www.wlu.edu/Documents/president/AfricanAmerican/burris_paper.pdf.

As for Lee, in his message to the community, Ruscio wrote that Lee had displayed "his estimable skills as an innovative and inspiring educator," adding: "I personally take pride in his significant accomplishments here and will not apologize for the crucial role he played in shaping this institution." President Ruscio addressed this issue at greater length in his 2012 essay that appeared in Inside Higher Ed, "Judging Patron Saints" (<http://www.wlu.edu/presidents-office/articles-and-opinion-pieces/judging-patron-saints>)

Will the University stop marches on the campus as part of the Lee-Jackson holiday observances in the city of Lexington each January?

The groups that have traditionally assembled in Lee Chapel following a parade through downtown Lexington have not formally marched on the campus. In his community letter, President Ruscio said that W&L, as an educational institution devoted to free and open inquiry, would continue to permit outside groups to use the chapel for events "so long as they do so in accordance with our established policies and guidelines." At the same time, he noted that no outside group of any kind may march on the campus or use the campus as a platform for its own displays or statements.

Will the University ban Confederate flags on the campus?

Displaying this symbol without "unambiguous historical or memorial context," as historian John Coski writes in his book, "The Confederate Battle Flag," is antithetical to Washington and Lee's avowed goal of inclusiveness. Hanging the flag in a dorm room, for instance, ignores the feelings of others in the community. At the same time, the University's strong commitment to free speech prevents it from issuing an outright ban on the flag. Instead, the University will continue to emphasize how essential it is for all members of the community to regard the feelings of others in order to sustain the kind of community that Washington and Lee values.

Will the University "fully recognize" Martin Luther King Jr. Day?

For many years, the University has recognized Martin Luther King Jr. during the week of the federal holiday with speeches, panel discussions, concerts and other events for the entire W&L community as well as for the local community. It will continue to do so. See the schedule of events for the 2014 MLK observance at <http://www.wlu.edu/student-life/culture-and-diversity/programming-and-events/martin-luther-king-jr-birthday-celebration>.

Undergraduate classes are now held at W&L on the federal King holiday; the Law School has suspended classes on that day since 2012.

The faculty is responsible for establishing the calendar. President Ruscio has now asked the undergraduate faculty to decide whether or not to hold undergraduate classes on MLK

Day. In his message, President Ruscio stated his preference that undergraduate classes not be suspended for the holiday; he is concerned that “a compelling series of events would give way to an uneventful three-day weekend.”

Is the University considering removing "Lee" from its name?

No. Among the many spurious rumors and claims perpetuated by the current controversy, this is the most absurd.