

Wisdom Born of Experience

(The following remarks were delivered by President Reveley at William and Mary's Charter Day ceremony on Feb. 7, 2009.)

Why do we gather in PBK Hall each year for Charter Day? Precious few other colleges or universities set aside a day annually to celebrate the details of their births. Certainly, no other place celebrates by reading a royal charter from the late 17th century. Indeed, among the thousands of colleges and universities in America, virtually none but William and Mary has a royal charter to read. So, why do we gather each year for Charter Day?

Perhaps we gather because William and Mary is very old, and people in Virginia like old things. Doubtless we all remember why it takes five Virginians to replace a light bulb — one to unscrew the old bulb and insert the new, and four others to talk about how truly marvelous the old bulb was. So, Charter Day is very Virginian, a time to remember fondly the College's ancient self.

Or perhaps we keep Charter Day so faithfully because of our ardent regard for the British royal family. Recall our delight in having the queen — Elizabeth II — in our midst twice, with 50 years separating her two visits, and Prince Charles in 1981 and again in 1993, when he returned to celebrate the 300th anniversary of the College. Of course, it was not always so. William and Mary spat out the British royals during the Revolution. It jettisoned our college seal crafted in England, replacing it with one designed by George Wythe and in use from 1783 to 1929, when the original seal was resurrected. Wythe, Washington, Jefferson, Marshall, Monroe and their Revolutionary colleagues would not have gotten a kick out of gathering once a year to read a royal charter; but a lot of water has flown under the bridge in Williamsburg since the Revolution.

Beyond Virginians loving old things, and William and Mary loving royal Britons, perhaps there is a bit more substance to why

Charter Day appeals to us. Let me try to capture what that substance might be. To quote an article I wrote a few years ago:

"Judging by behavior, people do put stock in what came first and, more generally, in things with some age on them. Jamestown stresses it got underway before Plymouth Rock as the oldest permanent English settlement in America. ... Among the various states, Virginia and Massachusetts guard their temporal primacy. Most people prefer to cite the sayings of long dead presidents than those still living or only recently gone the way of all flesh. We line up to see famous old things, like the original Declaration of Independence. We suffer angst when antiquities are lost. We celebrate institutional birthdays every 25 years, with special passion on occasions denominated in the 100s.

"Why do people behave this way? Perhaps because there is a presumption of quality inherent in age. People who belong to old institutions, accordingly, often feel distinguished themselves because of the association. They are nourished vicariously by the institution's deep roots and flourish under the glory of its ancient foliage. They feel linked to past generations, on common ground with those who also have been nourished by the institution in earlier years. This is especially true when those who have gone before went on to glittering achievement.

"Why should there be a presumption of quality in age? Perhaps because it suggests staying power; the capacity over time to survive adversity and seize opportunity, the poise and dignity that come from surmounting countless flaps and crises, and the wisdom born of experience, especially the knowledge what not to change even as everything else does. ...

"Whether universities, regiments or law firms, some institutions move powerfully from one generation to the next. Others find themselves becalmed, or they founder. Reasons for success and failure are legion. But those institutions that prevail usually take strength from their past. They remember their heroes, their times of peril and triumph, and their basic



beliefs. The importance of the past as a source of confidence and poise grows with the turmoil of the present."

So, on Charter Day we celebrate the presumption of quality inherent in William and Mary's being the second-oldest institution of higher education in the United States. We celebrate the wisdom born of experience over 316 years, including our sense of what not to change even as everything else changes. We celebrate the staying power born of perseverance in the face of wars, financial disasters and controversies, both internal and external. We celebrate the poise and dignity born of experience and perseverance — poise and dignity not just during the good times, but especially during the bad times. There is very little William and Mary has not seen and very little it has not survived.

Inexperienced and untested institutions do not always respond with the grace under pressure shown by those who have been around for more than three centuries. So, we celebrate each year on Charter Day the College's grace under pressure.

The mythical bird, the phoenix, was on the seal George Wythe designed for the College, the one that served William and Mary well from 1783 to 1929. A graven image of a ferocious-looking phoenix sits where our Old Campus meets the New Campus. The phoenix was placed there in honor of the College's 275th birthday with a quote that reads: "From the old to the new, may this entrance, like the phoenix, symbolize a look to the future made promising by a challenging heritage."

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