

FROM THE BRAFFERTON

William and Mary's Birthday

February is filled with important American births. Four U.S. presidents — George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, William Henry Harrison and Ronald Reagan — were born in February, as were Susan B. Anthony, Thomas Edison, Charles Lindbergh and Babe Ruth, to name a few. Not least among February's momentous births is William and Mary's. The College was born on Feb. 8, 1693, by the signing of the Royal Charter, and turned 317 this year.

Despite a looming winter blizzard, a hearty group gathered in Phi Beta Kappa Memorial Hall for 2010 Charter Day ceremonies. We welcomed Virginia Gov. Bob McDonnell a mere three weeks after his inauguration as the speaker and the recipient of an honorary degree. It is William and Mary's custom, as the senior institution of higher education in the commonwealth, to give the first honorary degree to each newly elected governor. McDonnell drew upon William and Mary's historic triumphs over wars and economic crises as assurance of the future of higher education in Virginia and pledged to keep alive "the outstanding partnership between William and Mary and the commonwealth."

Joining McDonnell in receiving honorary degrees (in a line stretching back to Benjamin Franklin) were professors Martha Nussbaum and Wayne Kernodle. Nussbaum is a renowned American philosopher currently at the University of Chicago. Kernodle, Chancellor Professor Emeritus at William and Mary, came to the College right after World War II and has made an enormous difference for the better over two generations.

After discovering that current students had little if any sense of Charter Day, a concerted effort was made this year to encourage their involvement. Each student received an invitation to the event, celebratory banners hung from lampposts around campus, British flags hung from the Wren Building, and there was special food in the

dining halls. A new online home for Charter Day was created, complete with videos, pictures, blogging and tweeting about the College's birthday. The day before Charter Day was declared "Tribe Pride Friday" with everyone urged to put on some green and gold, including members of the Board of Visitors who were meeting on campus. Most of them remembered.

Also planned were two new Charter Day traditions aimed at students, a colonial-themed dinner in the dining halls and a "Birthday Bash" in the Wren Yard after the annual Charter Day Dinner. These events fell prey to the rampaging snow, but they will rise again next year.

As is tradition, the president gets the last word at the Charter Day ceremonies. I believe in keeping it short. This is most of what I said:

When Charter Day is stripped to its essentials, laid bare, it's a birthday, a celebration of another year in the long life of the College of William and Mary. As our charter indicates, William and Mary was born on Feb. 8, 1693. So, today, Feb. 6, 2010, almost 317 years later, is close enough for purposes of this year's birthday celebration.

When we humans are young, our birthdays come around very slowly and once the magic moment finally arrives, it is glorious. The wild animal excitement of birthdays subsides as the years accumulate, and the birthdays begin to pile up, rolling in more and more quickly, relentlessly, like the surf rushing to shore. Some birthdays remain special, though — when we get to be 21 — or 300.

William and Mary had celebrated its 83rd birthday when the colony of Virginia declared independence from Great Britain in June 1776, creating the state of Virginia. Our state was born right here in Williamsburg. W&M people played leading roles in creating it as well as in giving birth to the United States of America. As Dumas Malone put it, "Our continent has provided no greater seedbed of greatness than the one square mile of this old colonial capital, and no American institution of learning has



ever surpassed the record of this little College, in Jefferson's generation, as a nursery of statesmen." With shy modesty, we at William and Mary do call ourselves the alma mater of a nation.

William and Mary has been alive and kicking for more than three centuries. The College is still glued together, moving ahead, full of current excellence and future potential. That's quite something.

Let me end this birthday riff with a few epigrams. As you'll see, I've been ecumenical in my sources. They range from two Popes to Dr. Seuss. Their common theme is a celebration of age. If anyone enjoys celebrating age, it's those of us at the College:

- Pope John XXIII — "Men are like wine. Some turn to vinegar, but the best improve with age."
- Pope Paul VI — "The older the fiddler, the sweeter the tune."
- German proverb — "To remain young while growing old is the highest blessing."
- Pablo Picasso — "It takes a long time to grow young."
- Henry Ford — "Anyone who keeps learning stays young."
- Abraham Lincoln — "And in the end, it's not the years in your life that count. It's the life in your years."
- Finally, Dr. Seuss — "Today you are You, that is truer than true. There is no one alive who is Youer than You."

There is only one College of William and Mary. So we do say to this marvelous university on its 317th birthday, in the words of Dr. Seuss, truly "there is no one alive who is Youer than You."

W. TAYLOR REVELEY III
President, College of William and Mary