

August 24, 2019; rev. June 11, 2020)

Terry L. Meyers
Chancellor Professor of English, Emeritus
College of William and Mary

The W&M Anglo-Saxon Club

In my 2008 [article](#) “A First Look at the Worst,” I mentioned (p. 1158) the apparent existence at William and Mary of an Anglo-Saxon Club, a unit of a white supremacist organization, the Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America. That outfit had been established in Richmond in 1922 with the aid of John Powell, at once a distinguished musician and a deep racist (he managed to include his racist views in his compositions). Among his accomplishments was help in drafting and passing Virginia’s notorious Racial Integrity Act of 1924; the Anglo-Saxon Clubs were accessories to that effort.

According to Wikipedia, more than 400 white men soon became members of some 31 Anglo-Saxon Clubs in Virginia (Charlottesville had two “Posts,” one for town and one for gown).

Thanks to Amy Schindler, former archivist at Swem Library, we now have more information about the College’s own Anglo-Saxon Club. Amy linked to three issues of the [Flat Hat](#) in an entry to the [Special Collections Wiki](#) added in 2011.

The [Flat Hat](#) of May 18, 1923 had on its front page an enthusiastic review of a concert given by Powell at Jefferson Hall; the program ranged from Beethoven and Chopin to two racially charged pieces, “Turkey in the Straw” and Powell’s own “Banjo Picker.”¹ These last two were particularly well-received: both were “ardently applauded” and repeated “in response to the demands of the audience.”²

¹ “Turkey in the Straw” was popularized in blackface minstrel shows from the 1820s and 1830s. YouTube has a [recording](#) of “The Banjo Picker” made by Powell on a paper roll in 1917. The video shows several paragraphs about Powell and the piece; one of them notes that “The Banjo Picker” evokes “Dixie” in its opening measures and then ends “with the strains of ‘Dixie.’” Powell is quoted as saying that the “principle theme” is “a verbatim reproduction of a darky banjo-player’s version of the ‘Mississippi Sawyer’”; a “contrasting theme follows, based on the negro folk-song ‘Old John Hardy.’” The paragraphs seem to be from the volume pictured in the video, [Duo-Art Piano Music: A Classified Catalog of Interpretations of the World's Best Music Recorded by More Than Two Hundred and Fifty Pianists for the Duo-Art Reproducing Piano](#)

While Powell was on campus, according to a story on p. 2, he guided some 20 male students to begin the “tentative organization of a Post of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America.” Powell gave a talk on the origin of the movement,

going into the causes of the deterioration of the old civilizations, such as Egypt, Spain, Rome, Greece. The movement is based largely upon the desire on the part of Americans to keep America a hundred per cent white, and with this in view to alter existing laws so as to entirely eliminate the inter-marriage of whites and those having even a drop of negro blood.

It seems likely, indeed, that Powell came to campus primarily to solicit support for an Anglo-Saxon Club at the College. The Flat Hat of April 15, 1923 noted (p. 6) that Powell had “offered to reduce his usual fee by one-half” to give a concert.

On p. 1 of the Flat Hat issue of February 15, 1924 is an article drawing attention to “an active campaign” to attract members to the Anglo-Saxon Club Post at the College;³ the W&M constitution had been approved at a State Convention in Richmond in November 1923⁴ but was delayed in receipt.⁵

(New York: The Aeolian Company, 1927).

In a slightly oblivious account, David Z. Kushner says of Powell in Grove Music Online that after living in London for several years, Powell returned to Richmond, where he developed an interest in black American folksong. His reputation as an important American composer was established with the première of *Rhapsodie nègre* for piano and orchestra (1918). Inspired by Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness*, the work quotes black American melodies and uses syncopated ragtime rhythms. Powell, however, did not believe that black melodies could serve as a basis for a national school of composition.

² In anticipating Powell’s concert, a Flat Hat article flagged his racial focus: “As composer, Mr. Powell symbolizes Americanism; his inspiration takes root in the soil of his native land. In his widely popular ‘Rhapsodie Negre’ he deals with the intensely American problem, the psychology of the American negro” (Flat Hat, May 11, 1923, p. 1).

³ Also on page 1, coincidentally, is a mention of an up-coming minstrel show; details of the blackface acts are described in the issue of February 15, 1924, p. 1 and especially p. 5.

⁴ The William and Mary Post was represented at the Richmond convention by a member of Kappa Sigma, Reginald Arthur Kenney (<https://tinyurl.com/asckenney>). Kenney went on to receive a Masters degree in English from William and Mary in 1935. His thesis was a study of Robert Burns’ presence and stature in the ante-bellum South, “a civilization that was swept away for the most part with Appomattox” (“Robert Burns and the Old South” (1935). *Dissertations, Theses, and Masters Projects*. Paper 1539624431. <https://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21220/s2-v607-ch46>, p. 3). Interestingly, Kenney was from Utica, New York (see the last page of his thesis).

⁵ John Cofer Landon quotes a Richmond newspaper account (June 5, 1923) to the effect that the Post at William and Mary was in existence even that early (“[The Plea for Racial Integrity: A History of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America](#),” M.A. Thesis (History, University of Virginia, 1978; p.28). Posts at colleges and universities were supposed to train future leaders for the movement (p. 52). Landon’s thesis provides a good account of Powell.

Among the objects the local Constitution parroted from the larger organization's were "the wise limitation of immigration and the complete exclusion of unassimilable immigration," "the preservation of racial integrity," and "the supremacy of the white race in the United States of America, without racial prejudice or hatred [sic]."

Membership was open to "all native-born, white, male, American citizens over the age of eighteen years." Mentioning active posts at "other colleges in the State including the University of Virginia, Washington and Lee, Randolph-Macon and others," the article says that "the William and Mary Post is desirous of becoming as active as any in the State."

Landon says (with no further details) that at least one faculty member at William and Mary was a member of the Anglo Saxon Club;⁶ that participation and the support of

⁶ The most likely faculty candidate for membership, seemingly, would have been Dr. Donald W. Davis, a biology professor and W&M's leading proponent of eugenics. But in "Eugenics at William & Mary" (available at the Lemon Project [Research and Resources](#) page), Emma Bresnan notes that, though clearly a racist, "Davis thought that the unscientific rhetoric by the likes of Walter Plecker and the Anglo Saxon Clubs of America (ASCOA) would damage the reputation of eugenics, and attempted to defend the 'science' of the movement" (p. [1]); "Davis was passionate about casting the conversation about Eugenics in a more scientific and less sensational light in response to the ASCOA."(pp. [9-10]). She notes that

In January 1925, Davis and faculty from the Medical College of Virginia organized a group to try to diffuse tensions at the [Virginia legislative] committee on race relations and convince them that Plecker, Cox, and Powell's approaches are unscientific and that true science, not radicalism should be used to justify and inform the eugenics program of the state. (p. [10])

Bresnan thoroughly documents the racism and anti-immigrant fervor notable in the College's curriculum in the era.

Exchanges with my colleague Jennifer Lorden prompt me to suggest another possible faculty member in this connection, Dr. John Lesslie Hall, Professor of English and an Anglo-Saxon scholar. In Half-hours in Southern History (Richmond: B. F. Johnson Publishing Co., 1907), Hall comments, "the negro question has long been the apple of discord between the sections of our country. How preposterous it seems for brethren of the great Anglo-Saxon race to quarrel over a race so manifestly inferior, and so clearly intended by providence to occupy a position of inferiority!" (p. 293).

The name of a noted W&M graduate (Class of 1904) and faculty member in 1923, Oscar L. Shewmake, appears twice in documents concerning the Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America. Shewmake was professor of law at the College until the end of the academic year in 1923 and was still on campus when John Powell gave his concert.

The first mention is in The Collegian, the University of Richmond student newspaper, a claim that Shewmake drew up the constitution of the Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America that was to be adopted at the state convention beginning on October 13, 1923: "The meeting, which may continue through Sunday, will be for the adoption of a constitution drawn by Oscar L. Shewmake, the election of officers and discussion of plans for propagating the movement throughout the United States" (October 12, 1923, p.1; the article lists two dozen Posts, including 7 at universities).

The second mention is in a letter by John Powell to the judge who had allowed a woman, Atha Sorrels, whose family records noted members as "colored," to receive a marriage license to marry a white;

other influential Virginians (including Governor Trinkle) “gave some support to Powell's assertion that the membership came from influential sectors of society” (p. 51) (Powell named Governor Trinkle a "real enthusiast in the movement" [p. 32]).

Amy also links to an editorial in the Flat Hat of April 17, 1925 (p. 4) which comports with the values of the Anglo-Saxon Club. The writer⁷ regrets the “advent of higher education for the negro” and the rise of the “educated negro”—“we cannot overlook the teaching of social equality which can have but one ultimate result—inter-marriage—unless the whites of the country are taught the meaning and priceless heritage which they possess in a pure white race.” Earlier mentioning W. A. Plecker, Virginia’s State Registrar of Vital Statistics who drafted the Racial Integrity Act, the writer calls for nineteen other states and the District of Columbia to pass laws prohibiting “the inter-marriage of whites and blacks. They have, by their failure to act, sanctioned the teaching of equality which will result in the lowering of the higher race to the level of the lower.”

Landon concludes of the Richmond Anglo-Saxon Clubs that “between the year of the clubs’ founding, 1922, and the probable time of their demise, 1930, the Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America exerted a sporadic but impressive influence on the history of

“colored” was deemed in this instance to mean “Indian” and there were no witnesses or evidence to the contrary. Powell at first wanted to see the case appealed, but, Mika Endo has noted,

Powell’s plan to appeal the Sorrels case ... was discouraged by advice from Virginia’s assistant attorney general, Leon Bazile, who warned that if they appealed the Sorrels decision, the appellate court would likely declare the Racial Integrity Act to be unconstitutional. Bazile added, ‘inasmuch as the law seems to be working all right outside of Judge Holt’s circuit, we would run the risk of losing a great deal on the chance of reversing him in one case.’

(“The Word ‘Mixed’ without the ‘Indian’ Would Be Better: Virginia’s Racial Integrity Act and the Destruction of Indian Race in the Early Twentieth Century,” Native South, 7[2014], 97; Project MUSE, doi:10.1353/nso.2014.0007)

Endo then notes that “a few months later, Powell wrote a letter to Judge Holt. ‘After mature consideration,’ Powell wrote, ‘the Attorney-General and Judge Shewmake, representing the Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America, have decided not to appeal the Sorrels case’”

The pamphlet that Powell issued on the case, The Breach in the Dike: An Analysis of the Sorrels Case Showing the Danger to Racial Integrity from Intermarriage of Whites with So-Called Indians (Richmond: Anglo-Saxon Clubs of America, [1924]), cites advice from “high legal authorities” (p. 14) on issues of law.

I can find no evidence that Shewmake was a white supremacist; possibly he was retained in both these instances simply for his legal skills.

⁷ Probably Larry C. Green, editor of the Flat Hat, and identified in the issue of February 15, 1924 as President of the Anglo-Saxon Club. Green was also President of the College’s chapter of Kappa Alpha (The Kappa Alpha Journal, 39:2 [1923], n.p.)

Virginia race-relations.“ Their greatest harm, of course, was in advancing Virginia’s 1924 Racial Integrity Act, passed March 20, 1924.

Whether the W&M Post worked towards that goal is not known—what we know of the Post, its activities, and its effects is slim indeed. The original intention apparently had been for the academic clubs to help advance the legislative agenda,⁸ but Richard B. Sherman notes that although the parent organization “did produce effective lobbyists,” “there is no evidence that the collegiate branches played a significant role in promoting the clubs’ legislative objectives.”⁹

⁸ According to a summary in the finding aid to the John Powell papers at the University of Virginia, a letter from W. A. Plecker (November 3, 1930) says that “Anglo-Saxon Clubs were set up to help the passage of racial integrity laws.”

⁹ “‘The Last Stand’: The Fight for Racial Integrity in Virginia in the 1920s.” *The Journal of Southern History*, 54:1(1988), 77, 76). www.jstor.org/stable/2208521)