

“Ill-advised and heedless views”¹

By Will Molineux

An African American girl, walking across the William and Mary campus trailed by a dog, caught the rude attention of male students who thought their loud-mouth insults would impress coed classmates. They proclaimed the mongrel, a campus pet named Herman, “was in high society now” and that he had “a new and different girlfriend.”

Their callous racial insensitivity on that October day in 1944 was publicly rebuked a few days later in a letter to the student newspaper, *The Flat Hat*. “If they did not realize by the sound of their remarks how very much they were hurting the girl, one look at the expression on her face, and tears rolling down her cheeks, would have shown them how very petty they were being,” wrote sophomore Connie Conway.

“This may be the South, and some Jim Crow laws might be in existence here, but there is absolutely no reason for insulting an apparently well-mannered citizen of the United States—for the Negro is that, too, as well as human.”

Conway exposed the rawness of racial prejudice that could surface during World War II when male undergraduates were outnumbered by coeds three to one.² The men, as Conway pointed out, didn’t need to be “sharpies” to gain female attention.

The next semester *The Flat Hat’s* editor wrote an unsigned editorial that argued for racial equality and the admission of black students. Days later, when a Williamsburg newspaper reporter brought it to the public’s attention, brouhaha erupted—one that evolved beyond race relations.

Marilyn Kaemmerle’s editorial said, “The Negro should be recognized as equals in our minds and hearts.” It was titled “Lincoln’s Job Half Done” and appeared in the February 7, 1945, edition, bundles of which were distributed late that Wednesday to the commons areas of dormitories.

¹ Quote attributed to William and Mary President John E. Pomfret as cited in the minutes of the Board of Visitors meeting February 10, 1945.

² Of the 1,007 students enrolled, 781 were women and 225 were men.

“We believe and know,” Kaemmerle wrote, “that Negroes differ from other people only in surface characteristics: inherently all are the same.” She proposed: “Negroes should attend William and Mary; they should go to our classes, participate in college functions, join the same clubs, be our roommates, pin the same classmates, and marry among us.”³

As an editorialist she wrote in the anonymous third person, but the bold and sweeping pronouncements were hers, based on her personal research and thinking. Kaemmerle recognized that racial equality was an idealistic concept, one unlikely her fellow undergraduates would take up. She didn’t call on them for any immediate response or action.⁴

Racial equality, she wrote, “cannot and should not be done today, or tomorrow, but perhaps the next day. Neither they [African Americans] nor we are ready for it yet. Only chaos such as the southern states experienced during the Reconstruction would result if such plans were initiated before both Negroes and others were educated for it.”

Yet, Kaemmerle’s editorial was timely. It was presented in recognition of the 136th anniversary of Abraham Lincoln’s birth February 12 and at a time when, as she noted, American servicemen in Europe were defeating “Hitler’s Nordic supremacy nonsense.”⁵

Thursday campus attention was directed toward that morning’s academic convocation to mark the 252nd anniversary of the college’s charter granted by Great Britain’s King William III and Queen Mary II.⁶ Although the annual observance in Phi Beta Kappa Hall⁷ was a routine academic affair, the speaker commanded the attention of the Williamsburg community. He was Colonial Williamsburg President Kenneth Chorley, whose office was in the Rockefeller Building at 26 Broadway, New York City. He took occasion to assess the cooperation

³ Kaemmerle grew up in a suburb of Cincinnati, Ohio, and she said years later that dormitory maids were the first black people she knew. See “At W&M, the Column before the Storm,” *Newport News, VA Daily Press*, February 20, 1995. Contemporary news stories erroneously reported her hometown as Jackson, Michigan.

⁴ Kaemmerle said in a previous editorial she wrote had caused “a ripple” and she expected the same blasé response to “Lincoln’s Job Half-Done.”

⁵ American and allied forces had breached the Siegfried Line and were occupying the Rhine River’s west bank.

⁶ Classes were cancelled for the 11 a.m. assembly, but students were free to skip attending.

⁷ The auditorium of Phi Beta Kappa Hall was gutted by fire in 1953. It was rebuilt as an academic building and renamed Ewell Hall.

between the college and Colonial Williamsburg as companion educational institutions, calling tourists the Restoration's "student body" and its exhibition buildings "historical laboratories." He was looking ahead to peacetime when "Williamsburg will become the most important center of early American historical research in the country."

The event was reported in Friday's *Daily Press*, published in Newport News with an extensive circulation in the Williamsburg area. The reporter was Lloyd Haynes Williams, whose one-man bureau above the A&P grocery store on Duke of Gloucester Street was a short walk from campus.⁸ Williams must not have picked up a copy of *The Flat Hat* or heard talk of Kaemmerle's editorial, otherwise—as future events would prove—he would have written about it.

The editorial was not mentioned in Friday's *Virginia Gazette*, Williamsburg's weekly newspaper—its editor taking no notice of it, or ignoring it, although *The Flat Hat* was printed on the *Gazette's* press.

But Williamsburg was a small place—permanent population around 4,000—and its business block adjoined the campus at College Corner where Richmond and Jamestown roads meet. By Friday there had to be talk in town of *The Flat Hat* editorial, and the *Daily Press'* Williams must have heard it. The opinions Kaemmerle expressed at a state-supported college in a state that legislated against racial integration were, in his judgment, newsworthy—and sensational news at that.

That day college President John E. Pomfret was in his first-floor office in Marshall-Wythe Hall⁹ preparing an agenda for a scheduled meeting Saturday of the Board of Visitors in Richmond. Among the subjects to be addressed was the sale of the College Airport on Bypass Road, construction of a dormitory, and acceptance of a substantial gift from John D. Rockefeller Jr.

Once Williams obtained a copy of *The Flat Hat*, he instinctively sought Pomfret for a statement. Journalistically, it was fair to give him the opportunity to comment—in this instance, an anticipated rebuttal. Williams expected Pomfret to disavow Kaemmerle's sentiments

⁸ The commercial area is known today as Merchants Square.

⁹ Marshall-Wythe Hall has been renamed James Blair Hall.

publicly, but Pomfret was hesitant to discipline her. To do so would be an act of censorship.

Pomfret deferred to the Board of Visitors, and added Kaemmerle's editorial to the agenda.

Williams would have to wait a day for the college's statement. The story would be on-hold for a day. It would appear in Sunday's paper, which had the largest circulation of the week.

Williams, 39, a native of Norfolk and a 1929 graduate of William and Mary, was active in alumni, charitable, civic, and political affairs, often being a newsmaker himself. In 1935 he was awarded a medallion for service and loyalty to the college, and in 1940 he was elected as a Democrat to Williamsburg's City Council, a post he still held. He was also a segregationist who did little to hide his prejudicial views.¹⁰

Williams wasn't going to attend the visitors meeting in Richmond's exclusive male-member-only Commonwealth Club. Instead, it was agreed that Pomfret would report to him when he returned to Williamsburg.

Williamsburg Mayor Channing M. Hall Sr., 55, was a board member, and he and Pomfret likely traveled together. Hall, a William and Mary alumnus, was an attorney who was first elected to council in 1919 and had been mayor since 1934. He was considered Williamsburg's first citizen.¹¹

It was mid-morning when Pomfret brought up the Kaemmerle editorial and distributed copies. According to the meeting's minutes, Pomfret assured the eight board members present that Kaemmerle's editorial in "no way represented the opinion of the college on the race question and that the college should be safeguarded against ill-advised and heedless views in all its publications under its sponsorship."

¹⁰ Williams was an outspoken opponent of integrated public schools. He was defeated for reelection 1956 by Channing M. Hall Jr., who served in the European Theatre during World War II and was a recent graduate of the William and Mary law school. Williams quit attending Bruton Parish Church, where he served as a deacon, when the congregation was integrated in 1954.

¹¹ A study of leadership in Williamsburg conducted in February 1944 by the American Sociological Association that noted Channing M. Hall Sr.'s name was mentioned more times than anyone else's in a survey of 163 white persons. The survey did not take into account the opinion of blacks, because to do so would "merely complicate the picture." In 1948 Hall hosted South Carolina Senator J. Strom Thurman during his presidential campaign on the States' Rights Democratic (Dixiecrat) ticket that opposed anti-lynching legislation, abolition of the poll tax, and creation of a Fair Employment Commission.

He acknowledged that the college administration had a hands-off attitude toward the student publication, an oversight he said needed to be addressed.

The minutes continue:

“Freedom of expression has its responsibilities as well as its privileges, and it is incumbent upon the college to prevent abuse of this freedom. The president felt that because of a lack of editorial responsibility, the editor had forfeited the confidence of the college community, and, therefore, should not continue as editor.”

Pomfret said the “college should initiate some supervision over undergraduate publications, through faculty advisors or counselors.”

Oscar Lane Shewmake of Richmond, general counsel to the State Corporation Commission, offered a resolution that registered “thorough disapproval and condemnation of such sentiments in college publications” and proposed a way to control student journalists.

Shewmake understood the public and political ramifications inherent in a potentially explosive situation embodying race relations and free expression. He was a 1903 graduate of the college who earned a law degree at the University of Virginia. He had served on the college board from 1919 to 1921 when he joined the faculty as professor of government and law. Two years later he left Williamsburg to become counsel for the state regulatory board. His second board appointment began in 1940.

Shewmake’s resolution directed the college “administration and the faculty to take such corrective and disciplinary action as may be necessary, including the assumption of such control over approving the material in such publications as may be required.”

This didn’t satisfy Mayor Hall. Without naming Kaemmerle, Hall proposed the board direct the administration and the faculty “to remove from *The Flat Hat* staff and the college the author of the editorial.” His amendment failed to attract a second.

The board adopted Shewmake’s resolution 7-1. Hall voted against it, stating, as explained in the minutes, “that in his opinion the resolution should incorporate the expressions contained in his suggested amendment.”

The visitors declined to discipline Kaemmerle and set no parameters for the oversight of published student opinion. Those matters were left to Pomfret, administrators, and faculty.¹²

Meanwhile Saturday, Lloyd Williams sent his basic story by closed-circuit teletype to Newport News where linotype operators cast it in metal type.

He wrote, using ellipses:

“Williamsburg, Feb. 10—An editorial published in the current issue of *Flat Hat*,’ student publication at the College of William and Mary, declares that ‘work must be done in educating ourselves away from the idea of white supremacy for this belief is as groundless as Hitler’s Nordic supremacy nonsense’ and suggests ‘that Negroes should attend William and Mary ... go to our classes ... join the same clubs and be our roommates ... and marry among us.’”

His second and third paragraphs were not quite as long or as convoluted. Williams appended the full text of “Lincoln’s Job Half Done.”

Then he waited to hear from Pomfret. It must have been late Saturday when he returned to Williamsburg and gave Williams a copy of the board’s resolution. Rather than write a new lead for his story, Williams wrote an insert to update readers.

It was placed after the third paragraph: “The William and Mary Board of Visitors registered its ‘thorough disapproval’ of the editorial at its meeting today in Richmond.”

The board’s resolution followed:

“This board has formally considered the editorial appearing in the issue of *The Flat Hat* under the date of Feb. 7 bearing the caption ‘Lincoln’s Job Half Done.’ This board registers its thorough disapproval and condemnation of such statements in college publications and declares that while such sentiments may be those of the individual who wrote the editorial, the board believes that they represent in any way the views of the college, the administration, or the student body.

¹² The *Richmond News Leader* in its Monday afternoon edition quotes J. Gordon Bohannon, a Petersburg attorney and rector of the Board of Visitors, “I have no hesitancy in saying that I do not think this girl should be continued as editor of the paper or as a member of the editorial staff.”

“The board requests the administration and the faculty to take such corrective and disciplinary action as may be necessary, including the assumption of such control over approving the material in such publications as may be required.”

Williams added a quote from Pomfret, who said he “sincerely hopes that anyone who has read this editorial will consider that it was written by an undergraduate editor and by one who has had little expertness in the complex and intricate field of race relations.”

Williams also caught up with Kaemmerle and reported, “The 22-year-old, brown-haired, brown-eyed editor ... had no statement to make.”

Williams’s story appeared in the *Daily Press* on its front page under the two-column headline “W&M Student Publication Suggests Racial Equality; Board Condemns Sentiment.” It was distributed by The Associated Press with a Williamsburg dateline.¹³ The Richmond *Times-Dispatch* placed it on the first page of its local/state news section with the headline “Editorial in W&M Newspaper Urges Enrollment of Negroes.”

Pomfret summoned Kaemmerle to his office Sunday and told her he had “temporarily suspended” *The Flat Hat* and that the suspension would be lifted when she resigned and the remaining editors agreed to some as-yet unspecified oversight. With no newspaper to edit, Kaemmerle was out of a job—one that had paid a stipend. She never penned a resignation.

Pomfret also met Sunday with six junior editors and informed them of the newspaper’s suspension and told them it would be lifted upon Kaemmerle’s resignation and when they agreed to prepublication oversight. They unanimously rejected the proposal, considering it censorship.

Student leaders called for a mass meeting Monday to protest censorship. The faculty scheduled a Tuesday assembly to consider the Board of Visitors’ directive.

¹³ As a member of The Associated Press, the Newport News *Daily Press* was obligated to submit major news stories from its principal circulation area to the wire service for publication in other member newspapers.

The Reverend Francis H. Craighill, rector of Bruton Parish Church, offered student journalists the use of a mimeograph machine as a gesture of support for a free student press.

The Reverend Charles M. Pratt of Williamsburg Presbyterian Church preached a sermon on racial equality.¹⁴

Students posted placards Monday on campus bulletin boards declaring, “Freedom of the press or no press.” Williams interviewed Kaemmerle. “The racial issue is all over,” he quoted her as saying. “It is now a question of freedom of the press. The students don’t agree with me, but they feel that I should have the right to say what I think.”

At a rally that evening some students spoke out against the editorial, but most called for the resumption of a freely-edited *Flat Hat*. They adopted a resolution offered by sophomore R. Harvey Chappell Jr. of Clarksville protesting “infringement of the doctrine” of press freedom as “laid down by our honored alumnus, Thomas Jefferson.”¹⁵ They requested that the Board of Visitors participate in a campus forum.

Editorial writers in Virginia honed in on the editorial. “The *Daily Press* said Kaemmerle “went off the deep end.” The *Norfolk Ledger-Dispatch* thought her views “foolish and injudicious.” The *Times-Dispatch* judged hers to be a “juvenile and ill-considered outburst.”

African American editors of Norfolk’s *New Journal and Guide* featured news stories of the “Pro-Negro editorial” and the public furor it caused. The Associated Negro Press distributed accounts to 150 African American newspapers.

At Tuesday’s assembly, faculty side-stepped assuming any control of *Flat Hat* editors, and a minority issued a four-page statement expressing regret, as newsman Williams reported, “that it could not see eye-to-eye with President Pomfret.” A smaller number of faculty praised Kaemmerle for writing about race relations.

¹⁴ A March 2, 1945, editorial in the Kansas City, Kansas, *Plaindealer* says “Dr. Pratt preached a sermon Feb. 11 on racial equality” and quotes Craighill as saying he could “not agree entirely” with the editorial,” but insisted the student newspaper should be “entirely free from faculty censorship.”

¹⁵ Chappell received a BA degree in 1948, a JD degree in 1950, and an honorary degree in 1984. He was a leading Richmond attorney who served on the W&M Board of Visitors from 1968 to 1976, the last four years as rector. Freedom of the press is incorporated in the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights written by George Mason.

At a conciliatory campus assembly Thursday, president of the Student Assembly, William L. Williams of Norfolk,¹⁶ expressed regret for Kaemmerle's editorial, because such "expressions of opinion were likely to do harm to the college." The assembly and *Flat Hat* junior editors agreed to quasi-editorial supervision by two "faculty counselors," chemistry professor William George Guy and jurisprudence professor Dudley W. Woodbridge.

With that announcement, "the matter is apparently ended," Williams wrote in a three-paragraph story in Friday's *Daily Press*.

The publisher of *The Virginia Gazette*, Joseph A. Osborne, bemoaned the "undeserved publicity" the "unfortunate editorial" had "brought forth ... on this ancient college." He approved of editorial oversight, since "it is essential that only news and editorials conforming to the traditions of the college appear in its [*The Hat Hat's*] columns."

Publication of *The Flat Hat* resumed February 21 with a new editor, Ruth M. Weimer, a senior from Girard, Kansas. Named an editorial assistant was Connie Conway, the letter writer who had rebuked campus "sharpies" for their racist behavior.

Professors Guy and Woodbridge, in a notice to *Flat Hat* readers, affirmed their belief in a free press and stated: "If our advice is first sought by any of the editors, we will then, at their request, give an advisory opinion. ... The student editors are then free as far as we are concerned to reject or publish the questioned item."

In a separate column, Woodbridge wrote of the campus community and its interrelationships with alumni, the citizenry of Williamsburg and Virginia, elected state leaders, and other elements—all bonded by history and tradition. His concept of "I am the College of William and Mary" was endorsed in a signed editorial by Ruth Weimer, conscious that "we as students are the voice of the college."

She and other editors never solicited advice from professors Guy and Woodbridge. They, as acting managing editor Nancy J. Grube wrote, adopted a practice of self-supervision. Their editorials addressed college concerns, not race relations.

¹⁶ There is no relationship between William L. Williams and Lloyd Haynes Williams.

Kaemmerle was invited to the White House to meet Eleanor Roosevelt, but she remembered little of the conversation she had with the First Lady.

In later years Kaemmerle married Henry Quinto and they lived in Tucson, Arizona, where they helped establish a chapter of the National Urban League.

In 1980 she asked the Board of Visitors to “disavow the action it took in 1945.” Initially, Rector Edward Brickell claimed the current board could not be “the conscience of previous boards.” Five years later *Flat Hat* editors marked the fortieth anniversary of Kaemmerle’s editorial and petitioned the board to apologize for her dismissal as editor. The board’s response was that she “was a credit to the college.”

In 2001, six years before she died, she told *Daily Press* reporter Richard Stradling: “I have to confess, it never occurred to me that anyone off campus would even be interested in a student editorial. . . . I thought I was writing a student editorial for a student audience and never expected it to go beyond that.”

And it wouldn’t have, had not Lloyd Haynes Williams considered her editorial newsworthy and, by doing so, created a free-press controversy.

Molineux began a journalism career with The Virginia Gazette after graduating in 1956 from William and Mary. He knew Lloyd Williams, who died in 1959.