

The Tyler family legacy of progress at W&M



Students study in the newly-renovated lobby of John Tyler Hall. (Stephen Salpukas / Virginia Gazette)

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Tyler Hall at the College of Williams and Mary, freshly renovated, is the home of the economics, government, international relations, and public policy departments.

Its namesakes would hardly recognize it.

Lyon G. Tyler, W&M president from 1888-1919 and son of the 10th U.S. President John Tyler, would be familiar with the shell while expecting to see the chemistry, physics, and psychology departments housed within.

The early Tylers associated with the college, Judge John Tyler and President John Tyler, would be shocked to see it since the building did not exist until 1927.

Judge John Tyler attended the college where he and Thomas Jefferson were friends and classmates.

His son, President John Tyler, graduated in 1807 served as Chancellor at the college from 1869 until his death in 1862. In 1807, young John Tyler gave a rousing commencement address at Bruton Parish on "Female Education," under the direction of the president of the college, Bishop James Madison. The Bishop appears to have approved the topic, but was concerned about the "curls" young Tyler used in his writing and tried to have them amended to no avail.

The sentiment of favoring female education was passed on to his son Lyon G. Tyler, who, in 1918, presided over the first Virginia public university to allow women to matriculate. In the 1890s, he had held a faculty vote to allow women to attend classes, but it was voted down 4-3.

The [University of Virginia](#), went co-ed in 1972.

Lyon G. Tyler was nothing short of remarkable.

He was one of the sharpest men of his era. A keen intellectual, an historian, genealogist, lawyer, teacher, political junkie, farmer, landowner, author, a Christian and family man of exemplary stature, and a force in the world of Virginia politics.

While president of the college, he also was a professor of political economy, moral science, and civil government in the early years of his presidency. Later he taught American history and politics as well.

His enormous contributions to W&M include resurrecting W&M from the ashes of the Civil War 1888-1919. If he had done nothing else, this should be enough for fame to follow him forever.

But he also navigated the tricky waters of being a half public, half private institution, finally gaining full public support in 1906, ceding the land and buildings to government control, with the hopeful goal of being taken care of in perpetuity. As a progressive Democrat, he fully believed that government would be their savior.

He was a progressive educator in an era when that phrase meant a belief in universal education. Everyone should be able read, write, and do math. Everyone — male, female, black, white — should be educated. To that end he gave counsel and advice to every institution of higher education in Virginia, including Hampton University and the Richmond Mechanics Institute.

Lyon Tyler also created an enduring legacy for historians, the William and Mary Quarterly, an internationally respected history journal still in publication today.

He was at the helm of W&M when it was struggling to survive and was the captain who brought the ship not only safely to harbor but then launched it into ever-broadening seas.

He would surely recognize Tyler Hall today – from the outside, at least—but everything beyond the Colonial Campus would be a marvel to him.

Lyon Tyler always wanted the "Old College" to be a success. I think he got his wish, even if the new, uber-modern chrome and glass interiors of Tyler Hall might have left him perplexed.

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