A close look at the Liberty Hall Academy plantation in the years immediately following 1803

A research project
Anthropology 377

by
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Andrew Alexander

Andrew Alexander was born March thirteenth 1768 at his parents home on the South River near the mouth of Irish Creek. His father was William Alexander, a prominent merchant who was very active in community affairs. Andrew Alexander's father was also a principle benefactor of Washington Academy having donated part of the land making up its Pulherry Hill campus as well as serving on the board of trustees from 1782-1797. Andrew's mother was Anne Anne Reid the daughter of Andrew Reid and the sister of Andrew Reid, the first clerk of Rockbridge County. When Andrew was about seven his family moved to a farm on the North River in East Lexington. Eight years later his father moved the family into Lexington where they lived in a large house located

Mr. George Diehl, "William Alexander".

This.

(1)
on the present site of the president's house on the Washington and Lee campus. At the time of this move Andrew was around fifteen and had already begun a program of "classical learning" some four years prior. He later went on to graduate from Washington Academy in 1789 and took up farming as well as Engineering.

In 1796 Alexander became a member of the board of trustees and served on that board with his father until the latter's death in 1797. Upon his father's death, Andrew was made co-executor of the will along with Samuel Campbell his brother-in-law. Among other things, Andrew received from his father "...two parcels of land I purchased from Andrew Moore, attorney in fact for William Brown lying on Wood's Creek the one of thirty acres on which I now live." Consequently, Andrew Alexander managed his father's household

4McCulloch
6Diehl
7Ibid.
9Ibid., p. 3.
as prescribe by the will until 1803.

After the fire at the hall in 1803 the board of trustees elected to move the academy closer to Lexington. In response to this desire to change the site of the academy, Alexander proposed at the trustees meeting of March 3rd 1803 "to exchange his home near Lexington and two acres adjoining for the property of the academy of the former site; provided we (the board) purchase from him at sixty dollars per acre the balance of his land in the field adjoining said house." In short, Alexander would receive some seventeen hundred dollars in addition to the exchange of property.

What prompted Alexander to move his farm to Liberty Hall is one of the most intriguing questions in this entire period. The first explanation for such a decision is, that since Alexander was both a trustee of Washington Academy and a community leader, he must have felt the con-

This decision will be examined in greater detail later on.

Board of Trustees of Washington Academy, "Minutes", p. 102.

Ruffer estimates this to be about five times what the town gave to the academy.

According to Diehl's file of Alexander, he was a surveyor for the county, a member of the Virginia Legislature and a member of the Virginia board of public works.
tact between the town and the school would be of mutual benefit. Many historians have seen fit to criticize the appropriateness of such a move particularly if Alexander had the best interests of the school at heart. William Henry Ruffner, for instance, characterized the town as engulfed in "certain disorders and bitter animosities" and remembers the streets being filled with "contending parties armed with clubs, guns, and pistols and held in check only by officers of the law." He declares that such a move "greatly increased the difficulties of academical government and the temptations to idleness and vice among the students." It then seems unlikely that Alexander put the welfare of the school as the highest priority in his decision to switch property.

There were, however, some very "practical"

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14McCulloch.


16The founding fathers or early leaders of any community or institution have a tendency to be literally canonized by their descendents in both their deeds and actions but it should always be kept in mind that men like Alexander are, in fact, only human and their decisions often reflect the same type of bias that affect the actions of everyone.
reasons for Alexander to decide to switch land with the school. First, Alexander, who himself had a very large stake in the town, knew that the relocation of the school would do much to stimulate the growth of local business and of the town itself. Alexander also stood to gain immensely from the terms of the sale itself. First, he received in the trade a good piece of property which included the buildings used for the rector's house, the steward's house, the tutor's house, a stable, a smokehouse, a springhouse, and the ruins of the hall. Second, when Alexander moved outside the city limits he would no longer be subjected to any type of city taxes. Third, Alexander as a part of the deal insisted on selling the academy 28 additional acres which netted him the tidy sum of $1,700.

Another good reason for Alexander to want the move was that he was ordered by his father in his will to "furnish necessary and suitable provisions for my wife during her life, and my daughters Betsey, Nancey, and Tatsey until they marry

17Liberty Hall Archaeological Excavations' Staff, "An Introduction to the Liberty Hall Academy Archaeological Excavations." p. 3.

18It seems rather hard to explain Alexander's insistence on the purchase of this additional acreage by the university unless it reflects an attempt on his part to take advantage of the situation.
(if that should take place) if my wife and three daughters continue to live in the house in which I now live in." Accordingly, by moving the family to another house Alexander would be free of this burden. The fact that Alexander was married two months after he moved his family to the Liberty Hall site suggests that he wanted to get a little of this legal burden off his back before he took on the responsibilities of married life and a family of his own. Alexander thus stood to gain in many ways from the trade and the myth of him as a self sacrificing philanthropist can be comfortably laid to rest.

In May 1803 Alexander moved his bride and himself in with his family at Liberty Hall. His wife was Anna Dandridge Aylette of King Wil-

20. McCulloch.
21. This is not to suggest that Alexander ever shirked any of his family obligations but he probably felt it nice to be free of his father's "order."
22. This is not to say that Alexander didn't have the interests of the academy and the town into consideration before offering to trade land with the university. Indeed, this could be the only thing he took into consideration but he certainly didn't come out badly.
23. McCulloch.
The Move from the Liberty Hall Site

After the fire of 1803 the students were relocated to "the brickhouse of a Mr. New Comber."27 The board then obtained "skilful workmen" to ascertain the extent of damage inflicted on the hall by the fire and to comment on the possibility of its renovation. After examining the ruins these "skilful workmen" concluded that the hall could not be repaired without incurring "more expense than profit."28 The condition of the hall after over one hundred and seventy-five years of exposure to the elements would seem to cast aspersions on the "skilfulness" of these workmen.29

After they received the report of the workmen, the board created a committee to look into the

27 Board of Trustees of Washington Academy.
28 Ibid.
29 Ruffner postulates that these workmen might have let their assessment be biased by the strong desire of the townspeople of Lexington to have the school locate within its borders. He also suggests that the trustees themselves might have encouraged such a conclusion in order the increase the amount that they received in damages from the insurance company.
possibility of moving the academy into the
city limits.30

The decision of the trustees to begin
looking for a new site for the academy is per-
haps one of the most intriguing decisions made
by that body. The decision to relocate was
justified by early historians because they be-
lieved that all the buildings of the academy
were destroyed by the fire, but recent Archaeol-
gical excavations of the site by Professor
John McDaniel of Washington and Lee Univer-
sity have proven that the hall was the only build-
ing that burned in that tragic fire. This
translates into the fact that the Rector's House,
the Steward's House, the Tutor's House, and
several other lesser structures escaped the
flames relatively unscathed.31 Considering the
fact that the transfer of land ultimately cost
the academy almost seventeen hundred dollars; the
board's decision to abandon six usable structures
(when the treasury had less than three thousand
dollars which they could use to completely re-
build the academy) seems foolhardy at best.

The result of trying to rebuild the academy on a new site with such insufficient funds soon became apparent. Ruffner points out that the new structures "were hastily constructed; the bricks and the masonry were of bad quality; and the walls near the ground began within ten years to decay so much as to require repairs. He points out that after a little more than twenty years the buildings were no longer safe for occupation.\(^3\) The lack of building funds also limited the size of the two structures to such an extent that these structures together (excluding the chapel) had only two rooms more than the old hall.\(^4\)

Assuming that the decision of the board to change sites was unwarranted, then the interesting question centers around why they did make such a choice. As earlier stated, the town desperately wanted the school to relocate into Lex-

\(^3\)Ruffner, p. 90.

\(^4\)The lifespan of these buildings seems rather short as compared with the very hall they were built to replace and serves to further diminish the wisdom of the trustees in this matter.

\(^4\)Ruffner, p. 90.
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