# JOHN D. WILSON

**December 8, 1995**

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**Mame Warren,**
**interviewer**

**Warren:** This is Mame Warren. Today is December 8, 1995. I'm in Blacksburg, Virginia, with John Wilson, the retired president of Washington and Lee University.

You were just starting to tell me about how far back your affiliation with Washington and Lee goes. You got me confused there for a minute. Can you explain?

**Wilson:** I don't think I did start to tell you about that.

**Warren:** About what class you go back to.

**Wilson:** Oh, I see. My alumni status.

**Warren:** Yes. Let's go right on back there.

**Wilson:** I have been made an honorary alumnus of the university, and I have a plaque over there that attests to that. I was officially invited by the class of 1953 to be part of that class, and because that was my baccalaureate year, I thought, well, that's a very nice thing, and it would give me a chance to come back to reunions.

I hadn't remembered that when the class of '40 had its fiftieth, at the dinner on Saturday night, they kind of made a gesture of membership in the class of '40, and I can't now tell you how well documented that is with respect to the alumni office itself or the board of trustees or the alumni board or whomever. But I was a little embarrassed to discover that I had some sort of affiliation with the class of 1940, which is Sidney Lewis' class.

**Warren:** That's a good way to [unclear].

**Wilson:** I had great fun. So I was astonished when I met Ernie Williams recently, and he wagged his finger at me to say he was really upset that I had forgotten that the class of 1938 had admitted me. I think that was far more casual. Ernie tends to operate without benefit of formal endorsements and so on, which is a great godsend for Washington and Lee. At any rate, I think he sort of invented this invitation all by himself. But I may, indeed, belong to three classes, but I'm proud to be an alumnus whichever way I fit in. I hope not to be solicited for annual fund gifts from all three classes.

**Warren:** Well, I wouldn't count on that. They seem very aggressive in that office.
**Wilson:** They are that.
**Warren:** I'm very grateful that they are. That's probably part of why I'm there.

Let me ask you what your first impressions were when you arrived in Lexington the first time. When was that and what did you think of the place when you first got there?

**Wilson:** Well, I had visited, as many tourists had visited, in years before the presidency became a possibility. I remember Anne had her English cousins over, and we drove up to Lexington, and had the children with us as well, and went over to VMI and introduced them to the penal environment of our sister institution, and then came by Washington and Lee and walked the colonnade and, I believe, went in the chapel, museum, and so on.

When I was told that I was a candidate for the presidency, I was not a declared candidate. I had been nominated by someone, obviously, and they hadn't asked me at that point. Given the peculiar and effective character of the search, they hadn't asked me whether I wished to be a candidate. They hadn't informed me that I'd been nominated. They simply went forward as, if the invitation were ever offered, no one could ever turn it down, which is a nice working assumption to have.

Anyway, I learned that the board was interested in talking with me in June of 1982, and I got a call from the rector, Mr. Ballengee, and he asked me if I would be willing to meet with a committee of the board who were seeking a president of Washington and Lee. Well, I hadn't thought much about this. They had been doing a great deal of thinking about a lot of candidates all this time, and I hadn't paid the slightest attention. But anyway, I said, yes, I'd come down and meet them.

I came on the campus in late June, I think, or very early July, but I think it was late June. I walked along the colonnade, really for the first time with my eyes truly open, and there was hardly anyone there. There was almost no activity. I think that the Fine Arts in Rockbridge program hadn't been seated there yet. There were no young people running around.

The faculty seemed to be in the library or in their studies or on holiday, and I had to ask someone where Lewis Hall was. It's, of course, across the ravine. I walked over there, and I met with the board for the first time, with this committee of the board. After that all afternoon or most of the day kind of conversation over there in Lewis Hall, we came over to Lee House and had dinner, some of us anyway did. Of course, this was a very intense period of mutual discovery of trying to find out things about the university and they were, in turn, trying to find out things about me.

In about three weeks' time, Mr. Ballengee called me to say that he wanted me to know that the board had agreed that I should accept this—you know, to offer this position to me. That was really an astonishing thing. I hadn't any idea they were that far along. Too, my family had not been prepared for this. I wasn't really prepared for it. I said I'd have to take a little while to really deepen my understanding of the university, that I would take that and I would set about in earnest, and I had to sit down with my wife and my children.

Sarah was a freshman in high school, almost the worst year in the life of a child to move. She wrote a long letter to me on legal-size paper that went for two or three sides, which I still have, saying that she would do, of course, whatever I thought in the end was best for us together, but she wanted me to know that moving was not in her best interest, and she pointed out several reasons why that was so. She had just lettered on the varsity track team as a freshman, which the gals' team had just won the state championship. She was a point guard in basketball. Mr. Murphy's team had won the state championship, though freshmen weren't eligible for the varsity, but she would be getting into that the following year. And then, of course, all of her friends. It was a very hard thing. I wrote a lengthy reply to her. We did this in correspondence at first. Finally, we decided that it was probably in everybody's best interest that I should accept this invitation.

I remember going to Skylark on that first visit to really come to know the university well, and my two boys, both of whom have unaccountable hunting genes—I don't know where they came from, not from me, maybe Anne's English ancestors, her father, something. Anyway, I saw them sidle over to Mr. Humphrey, who was the farm manager at Skylark. One of the boys said, "Mr. Humphrey, are there any deer up here?"

"Oh, yes, there are plenty of deer up here."

"Oh, really? How about turkey? Mr. Humphrey, are there any turkey up here?"

"Oh, yes, wild turkey everywhere you turn up here."

He came back over to me and he said, "Take it." [Laughter] So that was a key factor.

After I accepted the invitation, there was a press conference, and I learned about what other people had in mind about Washington and Lee, which had quite escaped me. One of the things was the fraternity system. I remember an early question in that interview by a reporter was, "What are you going to do about the fraternity system?"

I said, "What's to do about it?" I hadn't really penetrated deeply enough into the affairs of the university at that stage to know that other than the usual problems associated with Greek systems, that there were special problems associated with Washington and Lee.

After that, I continued my work at VPI [Virginia Polytechnic Institute] here in Blacksburg until January, when I came into residence and actually took up the job. Anne stayed here for another six months to get Sarah and Patrick through high school and then joined together at Lee House in June. All during that fall when I was still working here, I would come up to Lexington one day a week and began talking to faculty and the staff one on one and came to know a great deal more about the university, including problems with the fraternity [unclear].

**Warren:** So when you did penetrate that issue, what did you find with the fraternities?

**Wilson:** I found a faculty almost at its wits' end with respect to fraternity life at Washington and Lee. I think alumni continued to have affection for the system. It was a system, however, that had changed, and they weren't aware of how much it had changed for the worse.

**Warren:** What did you find? What was the situation?

**Wilson:** Well, I found the Sigma Nu House boarded up on the doorstep of the university, having been fired; i.e., set afire by students or somebody. It had been closed down for drug offenses and other inappropriate, even vial, behavioral problems.

Every house was a disaster physically. It was a sophomore-only kind of residency. No adults ever entered the house. The sophomore new members who had pledged just the year before were kind of expected to live in because they needed the income to keep what in effect was a party bunker. It wasn't a house. It wasn't a home, still less. The kitchens were ludicrous. House managers drawn often from the sophomore class, no experience in purchasing or anything else. The cooks were kind of hired in serial form. They were fired at one house and hired at another. They circulated through the system. Many of them were loyal and fine people, I'm sure. Others were ripping off the house. There was no one who knew how to purchase or look after things.

As I say, no adults entered the houses. The social life was intense. Women would come from the neighboring colleges, always on Wednesday nights, but Friday and Saturday and so on, as well. The police were beside themselves with the noise violations and garbage all over the streets on a Sunday morning after all night Saturday night.

I thought that the treatment of the houses, which was almost a part of the ritual to destroy the house, was part of what each class set out to do. There was no financial provision at any of the houses to maintain the house; that is to say, to replace furniture or to have cleaning people in if you're not going to clean it yourself. There were no house mothers, as you know, or house managers. The alumni involvement was all on paper. There were house corporations. Some of them had been incorporated and recognized by the secretary of state in the Commonwealth of Virginia; others hadn't. But even those that

had were moribund and had a membership list that included people who no longer considered themselves part of the house corporation. So there was no help from outside.

Oh, I should say this, that when I first arrived, sixty percent of the young men of Washington and Lee belonged to these houses, sixty-two percent. Thirty-eight percent chose to be independent. That was way down from earlier periods, and way down from what it is today, I might say.

But I don't believe alumni generally understood that. I remember the Williams College report on the fraternity system in the sixties. It was about '67 or '66, and it was a committee put together of leading alumni and staff and faculty. The first sentence of the report said, "The fraternity system to which alumni attach themselves with such affection and love is not the fraternity system alive and well at Williams College today." That, I thought, was a perfect description of what had happened at Washington and Lee, as well. In the late sixties and all through the seventies, these places just went to hell in a handbasket, and something had to be done.

**Warren:** How did you approach it and what was the solution?

**Wilson:** First, what needs to be said is that there were a lot of people who knew this even more intimately than I did. The faculty were disgusted with the uninhibited party scene that was, they thought, antithetical to the academic purposes of the institution and was actually contributing to the decline of the academic standards of the institution. I think they felt that strongly about it. They even felt that it was attracting the wrong sort of student to Washington and Lee. The guy who was anxious to be part of the wild party scene was much more apt to take seriously Washington and Lee than maybe someone more studious and more intellectually acute. Anyway, there was a general concern about the academic standing of the institution and whether it would ever achieve the levels that had been known and taken for granted in the sixties and earlier.

But there were alumni who also were very much aware that we had a bankrupt system, and a couple of them took time out to come by to see me even before I came into residence. Don Bane from Spartanburg, South Carolina, was one who asked if he could take me out to dinner in Roanoke. Jimmy Gallivan, who had been one of the most outstanding trustee, alumnus leaders and trustee—he just retired from the board—he called in on me and gave me some background as to how we'd gotten to where we were and how unhappy many of the alums who came back often enough to see it were.

Parents were upset when they would come and transfer their sons from the dormitory into these houses. One mother came by and said to me, "Mr. Wilson, I just moved my boy into Pi K A (I think it was) and there's only one thing lacking. I thought I'd call it to your attention."

I said, "What's that?"

She said, "A condemned sign." [Laughter] I thought that was amusing, but it was also very embarrassing for an institution of such style and history of stability and so on to be permitting this antithetical system to grow up in its midst.

So there were those folks. Then on the board of trustees Tom Touchton was a very strong early advocate of change in the fraternity system, and Paul Murphy, Colonel Murphy, up in McLean, Virginia. Paul had really spearheaded the first attempt to bring Sigma Nu back to life, which had been his house in the forties, and it was dead. I mean, there was no house at all. The charter had been lifted and the house was a wreck and boarded up with plywood over the windows. This is fifty yards from the front gate; not even that, just across the street.

So Paul and some others of the Sigma Nu alums got together and they began an effort, with the university's help, right away to get that chapter reestablished, and that involved a modicum of physical change. I think a little over one hundred thousand was put together. We helped with a loan. We didn't have a program then.

But interestingly enough, Dean John, Lew John was dean of students then, and his son, Chris, was a sophomore, and he took on the task, probably with his father's support and urging, of recolonizing Sigma Nu and getting some people to start that place up again. And so Chris John was a very key younger guy in this whole thing.

Anyway, I thought about that, and I watched—well, I'd come to a decision. First of all, we had a whole patchwork system, I mean a pattern of association with these houses, legal and fiscal. All of them had borrowed money at favorable rates from the university over time. I think there might have been eight hundred thousand or nine hundred thousand in outstanding debts across the system. We gave those loans by policy at three-quarters of market or something like that. But we had ownership of the land, not the improvements, but the land, in many cases. We had leased out this land for varying lengths of time—thirty years, fifty years, thirty-five years, a whole patchwork of that.

The house corporations were nominally the owners of the house. They were nonexistent, with very few exceptions. Maybe an odd alumnus or two would be interested enough to come up and try, but most had given up and gone away. I mean, the liability umbrella over those people was extraordinary if they had ever stopped to think about it very much. So we had this confused pattern of legal relationship with not very much to work with on the other side—that is to say, the house corporation.

Of course, the prior decision had to be, are we going to close them down as bankrupt and contrary to the business of the university or should we try to restore them?

We asked the alumni to understand the coed decision just at that time. I think to have asked them as well—

**Warren:** This was happening simultaneously?

**Wilson:** Well, we were discovering the fraternity system defects at the same time that we were introducing women into the university. They came in '85. I mean, the board had started the study in the late fall of '83, not long after I came, in fact. So I had come to the conclusion, and others had helped me with the conclusion, that it wouldn't be tolerable to have yet another significant change in what many people thought was a constructive part of undergraduate life, to have a significant change come right on the heels of this other very problematic change in the minds of many, many alums, who simply, like all good alums, don't want things to change very much from the way they were, and I understand that. I just fully understand that need to keep things the way they are as long as possible when you've reached the mellower years.

Anyway, we had to come to a decision, so our first decision was, we're going to try to reform them, and we had lots and lots of help from people like Paul Murphy. We created, with Paul's initiative, an Alumni Fraternity Council, get another group of alums representing all the houses together who would take an interest in this.

We had also made the decision that it would require a change not only in physical environment, but also significant change in behavior, and that meant we thought the presence of an adult person in each house, sort of what we knew when we were young as house mothers, to be reintroduced into these fraternities. These young people didn't even know what a house mother was, even though they hadn't entirely disappeared from fraternal life in America. In the Midwest, these big houses were still pretty much the way they were in the fifties and sixties at Washington and Lee. Anyway, the last house mother retired, resigned or was fired or whatever, in the early seventies at Washington and Lee. There hadn't been anybody in there for ten years.

One thing we thought we had to do was to fix them up physically so that they would all be something we could be proud of rather than ashamed of, and to do that as close to all at once as we could possibly do it so that no one house would have an advantage over others for very long.

Now, we had eight hundred thousand or nine hundred thousand dollars worth of debts out there. We had varying capacities to amortize more debt. Some houses were weak, few members; some were strong, lots of members and lots of money and dues, most of which went into partying. And then all of this debt structure, so it didn't add up often with the strength of the place. You have a very weak house with a very large debt. It couldn't manage any more than it was now dealing with.

So we adopted a principle that we were going to start anew and wipe out all those debts, even though it was not equal; i.e., House A had borrowed far more than House B, and therefore I was making a gift, in effect, by just forgiving that debt to House A. I was forgiving more there than I was obviously with other places. I couldn't deal with the complexity of trying to work it all out in some equitable way. This was going to be a socialized response to the problem. All houses are declared equal; we're all starting all over again. And so all of those debts were at once forgiven.

Two, we hired architects to come in and to assess the damage. Three, we developed physical standards. Every house had to meet these standards. That, again, was probably a foolish thing to do, because each one required a house mother's apartment, each one required a separate room for social events and a separate room for dining, so you weren't using your dining room, as, say, Sigma Chi was for partying. You can't believe the sanitation implications of that.

So we had these physical standards we measured each house against and had an architectural firm from Charlottesville that had some experience with the UVA fraternity system, because there had been an attempt house by house, with some university involvement, to do something over there, as well, not systemwide, not all at once, the way we did it.

But at any rate, the calculations came back crudely at first on the order of five hundred thousand dollars to nine hundred thousand dollars per house. Once again you had an equity question. Is House A, because it's got eleven thousand badly kept square foot footage, is it to get more from the pool of resources we were prepared to allocate for this purpose than House B, which was only six thousand square feet, etc.? Well, I couldn't deal with all that. We were just going to fix them all to the standard. The standard was driving this rather than equity. So we had these varying estimations that, frankly, proved to be conservative, but it added to ten million.

I'm going back now. Ten million was a very big gulp. But we were also thinking we were going to have a capital campaign downstream and that I could get at least five of that from alumni who professed this loyalty to these houses, and the other five we could find ourselves, if we were intelligent and thoughtful about it.

In the year 1984, Miss Parmly died in New York. She had given about two-million-plus during her last years to Washington and Lee, and Parmly Hall is named for her father to recognize that gift. In her will, she left about 1.5 million.

Colonel Tucker of Shreveport, Louisiana, a wonderful character in his nineties, died that year, followed his wife in death. His wife was much younger and no one expected her to die ahead of him. I'll never forget this forlorn and lost man in his nineties,

without his wife, longing to die. But anyway, he did in fact die in 1984. I think that's right. You might have to check. It could have been '85. And he left 2.4 million, unrestricted. Both of these were unrestricted gifts to the university. They totaled about four [million dollars].

I said to the board, "We are tempted to take that income on a normal orthodox endowment drawdown formula to enhance the operation of the university, but I'm going to ask you to set it aside as a special fund and let it grow. We won't take anything down. We'll simply let it grow." And we were in the eighties, when the market was behaving just as it has this last twelve months, growing very rapidly. So the four became seven before I had to turn to it, and that created the kind of pool of confidence. I felt that it could be done if we had the will to do it. We would have very substantial [private means?]. And then the five million, I was hoping would come from restricted gifts during the campaign.

But we had to get started, and Red Square was our first beginning point. There were five houses there—Pi K A, Beta, Phi Kap, Sigma Nu. Or is that four? One, two, three, four. Is that all? Phi Delta Theta. There were five houses in that first group.

We learned an awful lot. We had cost overruns. We had shoddy work. We had a contractor who had had a wonderful experience in the university, but he was overextended. He had too many projects going on, and we were at the bottom of the labor pool in Rockbridge County and people who were left were those who had simply exhausted their capacity to stay in the tavern another hour, you know, and not having skills. So we had a lot of frustration and unhappiness with that first unit.

But then we went out to Davidson Park. That included Lambda Chi across the way and Kappa Sig and Kappa Alpha, K A, and then the houses on Washington Street, quite a cluster of large houses, and we had a much better experience there, a different contractor. We were not ever able to underconstruct in terms of cost of the estimates, but they were at least more reasonable.

Then that left us with the most difficult of all. I left, by the way, Phi Gamma out of this, so that's a separate story because of the fire. That produced a different kind of approach to it.

**Warren:** But let's not leave that out.

**Wilson:** No, we'll come back to that.

There were three houses in the residential district, I'm going to call it—Phi Gam and the one next door and then the one down Lee Street [Avenue], Delta Tau Delta. And Sigma Chi on the corner. We had to make decisions—why can't I think of SPE at the end, Sigma Phi Epsilon at the end of it. It's now being renovated by, I think, Sils and Jean

Dunbar. But anyway, it doesn't matter. We sold it. We thought to meet the standards in that house would cost over a million dollars. It was just not cost-effective to do that. Sigma Chi was the same way. We had too small a site. We couldn't provide a proper apartment for the house mother and still do these other things we were supposed to do. We opened up the top, and we were going to have to create another staircase for code reasons, and it was just impossible. So that's the decision to build new houses out on Davidson Park and to turn those two houses to other uses. Sigma Chi, of course, became Brian Shaw's center there, and we sold the other house to get rid of it, next to Phi Gam.

As I say, with the exception of the fire, which came in the middle of the eighties, '85 or '86, a terrible disaster and probably arson, but the Commonwealth's attorney was unable to succeed in the prosecution, to my utter dismay. But anyway, the Phi Gams did rally around there with the very significant insurance proceeds that they had from the fire to restore that house, and they sold limited partnerships to three or four key members who were willing to invest in it. And what we did was, as the Fraternity Renaissance Program got started is simply buy them out, and we own all of those houses now.

That required another decision, I should point out, and it was contrary to the good judgment of a lot of people in higher education. But to own the houses was to bring the fraternities closer to the bosom of the university, the legal bosom, and therefore the liability flags started to fly all over, and people were saying, "You ought to distance yourself from those houses, not the other."

At Virginia, there had been a fraternity wreck on the highway, Route 29, I think it was. They'd hired a Hertz truck or something and had pledges in the back. Everybody was sloshed and they crashed and somebody died, and there was a lawsuit, and the university said, "Sigma who? Never heard of it. Not ours. That's a private corporation," etc., etc. I thought it was absolutely impossible to deny that the fraternities were part of the university community. We had lent them money at favorable—I'd love to have argued the attorney on the other side. I could have woven a very rich historical web of association. So I didn't worry about that.

In fact, when Chapel Hill folks came up to sit with us to ask how did we do this, what was involved, what were the key decisions that had to be made, I said to them—and I didn't know who they were, I mean, there were vice presidents of this, alumnus, this and that, and I said, "Don't listen to the lawyers. The first thing you must do is not listen to the lawyers." Of course, three of them were lawyers. [Laughter] I do that. I have a history of speaking before I think a little bit.

But at any rate, I mean that, because a good lawyer will caution you about these problems, try to keep you out of court, not bring you into court. But I felt that they were

ours, for better or for worse, and that if we got control of the ownership of the houses, then we could control their maintenance, and we certainly earlier—because, after all, you have an Interfraternity Council—I'm talking now about the intimacy of the relationship to begin with—and you have rules about fraternity life that the dean of students promulgates through various agencies, the student government and the IFC and all the rest of it.

So we felt that in addition to all of that, we could have the right to maintain them. We could send cleaning folks in there, and we hired an outside firm to do it. We didn't ask our B&G people to do it. The first three years was under contract, not too successfully, but twenty hours a week at every house, every day four hours times five, and not on the weekends, I guess. That was minimal, but it was twenty hours more than they had ever had before. So that the bathrooms were clean and somebody with an eye could see that something was going wrong with the leak over here. It could be repaired before the whole floor fell in, things of that sort.

There's nothing more certain, in my view, than that seventeen-year-olds and eighteen-year-olds and nineteen-year-olds are totally oblivious to the physical environment. Men. Young men. I'm not sure about women. Some women are more sensitive about that than others. But at any rate, that's kind of the story.

**Warren:** Let me ask you a really basic question, because this is a remarkable story. What inspired you to take this very bold and brave tact? Where did this idea come from? Because it seems to me that everything was headed the other direction and you took a very brave stance here. Where did you get this nugget of an idea to do this?

**Wilson:** Well, I don't want to discount these other people that we talked about, Paul and Tom Touchton and Jimmy Gallivan and Don Bane. And then when we got the Alumni Fraternity Council organized, we had people like Ed Bishop, who was this driving force behind Phi Gam. I could name dozens of people like that who brought their own enthusiasms and convictions to bear.

But I had seventeen bankrupt houses sitting in the lovely city of Lexington. I had eight hundred-plus students, sixty-some percent, the majority of the student body engaged in an enterprise that was not conducive to fostering of any of the values of the university put down. Hypocrisy was the dominant value coming out of the fraternity system, people pretending to be civilized gentlemen who were not, who put aside all of their normal values to engage in exploitation of one kind of another, especially [of] these young women who packed their toothbrushes in the trunk and would come down to Lexington on Saturday night.

It had to be done. You couldn't not do it if you were interested in the overall achievement of the level of academic excellence of the institution, because it was an impediment to that. The faculty didn't want to teach on Thursday mornings because people didn't come to class; or if they did, they came in an absolute stupor because they'd been up until three or four, drinking and all the rest of it.

But private colleges in the Valley—I found this when I was on the board at Hollins. I met with these students one time, a committee of the trustees, a nice genial meeting of these very attractive young women. They wanted to report on various things, you know. One of them said, "And we have Monday nights now, so it will be Monday night in the Rathskeller," or whatever they called it.

I said, "What do you mean, you have Monday nights?"

She said, "Well, we have Monday night, Sweet Briar has Tuesday night, Washington and Lee has Wednesday night, So-and-so has Thursday night, and, of course, the weekend is wide open, so that people will know where to go, where the action is." If you were serious about it, you could have been employed socially every night of the week.

I said, "I'm so pleased to learn that you have Monday night. I thought there might be one night of the week when somebody did some studying." [Laughter]

The Greek system had careened off in this direction. Maybe there was always a propensity toward it. I never stood before the Greek organizations of Washington and Lee and said, "I want you to become handmaidens to the faculty and to cultivate academic values." I wasn't looking for that. I was just trying to knock the negative side out. I wanted neutrality, if I could get it, out of a fraternity system.

I said that, in fact, in public at a large forum that Paul and others helped pull together, that I had no unrealistic expectations of these people to somehow turn their houses into little extensions of the library. I mean, that's just not going to be. It was contrary to what they were. They were social organizations. But the way undergraduates socialized in the seventies was very different from anything any of us older people knew. As I've said a dozen different ways in different times this morning, it had become antithetical to the purposes of the university—small u. You talk about Washington and Lee and its pretensions toward these values of civility and decency and compassion, noblesse oblige. Take the fraternity template and put it on the top of that and, as I say, you've got absolute hypocrisy. So it had to be done.

I didn't want to leave Washington and Lee and have seventeen derelict houses, big commanding houses, disfigure Lexington, quite apart from what it was doing or not doing for the purposes of the university. So I think it had to be done. It was interesting. I

had to appear with Frank [Parsons] before the planning commission. Holy tamale, I almost withdrew it.

**Warren:** Let me turn the tape over, because we're right at the end of the tape, and I know that's a big subject.

[Begin Tape 1, Side 2]

**Wilson:** We had to go before the planning commission and Frank can fill out the details about conditional-use permits and all of the legal entanglements. These houses had all been grandfathered into their purposes in the community of Lexington.

What the city fathers discovered when we were proposing to do ten million dollars worth of renovations, which turned out to be closer to thirteen, [was] that they might have an opportunity to undo all of these conditional-use permits and to insist upon a new order of behavior. They were going to become deans of students for us, the city council, and would withdraw the permits, you see. They were grandfathered and permanent the way they were now, in these derelict houses.

We were going to invest, on average, $750,000 in each of these houses to bring them up to standard, put house mothers in them, create house corporations that actually functioned and have a more active Interfraternity Council and all that. We were going to do all that, but they were going to say, "If we find five months downstream that there's been a noise violation in House A, then we will withdraw the permit for group non-familial individuals living together." I've forgotten how that reads. "Then we withdraw that, and they can no longer be, in effect, a fraternity house."

I said, "Are you telling me that you're asking me, or endorsing my investment of thirteen million dollars of the university's money, and maybe I've got seventeen non-useful houses six months from now because somebody called in a noise violation at Pi K A at twelve o'clock? You're mad."

Anyway, I stood before the Planning Commission at one point. There was all this noise about whether or not they were going to endorse this. I finally got up and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, it's become very clear to me that you prefer what we now have to what we might achieve, and I'm going to go away from this meeting and withdraw this petition before you, so that you will no longer have to worry about it. You can have what you have, and we'll make do some way." I also said, "I find it absolutely astonishing that a responsible body of city government would turn down an opportunity to see thirteen million dollars worth of renovations take place in the most squalid corner of the city, but that's your affair." I was that angry what was going on. Because they couldn't touch the grandfathered. I could have left them to go to hell in a handbasket and they could never have touched them, except if the police touched them every time they do misbehave.

So that was a bit of a struggle, and Frank was beside himself with my lack of patience at that point, because he had pretty good working relationships with the city, and I had sort of undone those in about ten minutes, but I was beside myself that we'd gone to all that we'd gone through. So anyway, we got by that. They quickly changed their minds about it.

**Warren:** So what happened? What was their response when you did that?

**Wilson:** Well, they decided that it would be possible to not change the grandfathered character of these permits and to let us go forward with the renovations. We were observing all the building codes, obviously.

**Warren:** Let's take a pause. [Tape recorder turned off.]

During our break we've been talking about how the student body has really changed. Of course, I'm very prejudiced where I'm coming from, but I've always made the assumption that the introduction of women has made a big difference in the university, and you were very much a part of that process. Can we talk about that, how that came to be, the drama of it? I'm sure it was dramatic.

**Wilson:** Well, it was near the end, and there were a few moments out on the alumni circuit when it was dramatic, I suppose, or at least trying.

**Warren:** What do you mean, the alumni circuit? Tell me what that means.

**Wilson:** This whole process involved several stages of consideration, obviously, and action. I think I told you earlier on that when I started to come to Washington and Lee in the fall of '82, I came weekly to talk with faculty, chiefly faculty, one on one, no major meetings but just individual conversations, the burden of which was to say, "Okay, I want to come to know you and your work and what interests you have intellectually and what courses you teach and your general perceptions of the state of the university and what we might do to enhance your work or remove impediments to make it better, your work with students."

I will never forget, there was Harlan Beckley, but I hadn't singled out Harlan over anybody else at that point. Harlan was one who echoed a theme that was widely sounded in those conversations when he pushed a book across the table toward me and said, "This is [Friedrich] Schleiermacher, whom I'm accustomed to teaching in the advanced courses in the religion department, and I fear that the bottom third of my classes are no longer capable of understanding Schleiermacher. And when that happens, my interest in remaining at Washington and Lee will be very seriously damaged."

So it became known as "the soggy bottom third." We still had bright young people around, many attractive, and I'm proud of them. When you talk about declining standards, people tend to think you're talking about the whole group. Well, you are in a

way, because the average board scores drop very, very significantly over the years, ten to fifteen years. But there were still bright, able kids in every class. Then there were what the faculty perceived was a growing number of kids who were not intellectually acute, who were not terribly interested in, enjoyed W&L and wanted a degree as just kind of a passport.

So it became quickly clear to me that improving the quality of the student body was number one, and no one felt that more strongly than the dean of admissions, Bill Hartog, who himself had only come three or four years before and had some sense of the whole, obviously.

So anyway, that was all part of the process that continued into the spring of '83, winter and spring of '83, when I was in residence and I was much more intensely involved, able to perceive things myself rather than strictly through the eyes of the faculty. By the spring of '83, I was emboldened enough to address the alumni at their annual reunion time in May in the chapel, and this was a speech that was largely reproduced in the alumni magazine in subsequent months. It in effect said that coeducation was something that this institution had to take a serious look at and re-examine, because, and then I cited a number of reasons, all mainly to do with academic achievement.

Anyway, almost no one noticed. No one in the chapel said, "Wait a minute," or buzzed outside. I don't even recall that the alumni magazine had a big impact on people. I don't mean that they don't read it. But by that fall, which is only nine months after I arrived, but really fourteen months after I started thinking seriously about Washington and Lee, I went to the board and said, "You must study this question. I don't want the faculty to do it. I don't want the administration to do it. I would like the trustees to lead this study." Because there had been a study in '69, mainly a faculty study, quite thorough, and it came out with the recommendation to change, which the board didn't accept. And then in '74 or '75, midway through the campaign that Bob Huntley was so ably running, there was another pass at it, but it wasn't more than that. It didn't even disturb the surface of the lake. And then the fall of '83 was it.

The trustees guardedly agreed to do this, using the standing committee structure of the board as the instrumentality. We, of course, helped with studies and data and white papers and so on. That went on, then, through '83-84, and then it was very widely known in the alumni body, because we, against my judgment, but very strongly supported by Farris and, I suppose, by Brian (I think Brian was there by then), that we should have an alumni survey of attitudes toward coeducation. I said, "It will be misunderstood if we

send this to sixteen thousand alumni. They'll think they're voting, and we'll have a referendum and it won't come out very well."

"No, we're going to have a scientific slant on this, and we'll get an outside firm," which, you know, hire an outside firm for large sums of money to come in, and then they have to ask you what questions they should ask, struck me as—but anyway, we did it in the spirit of trying to say, "This is an open process. Nobody's trying to hide anything from anybody." And so in that sense it probably was ultimately sensible to do.

One of the questions was, if Washington and Lee was to face a significant decline in its academic reputation, would you then support, if it had the promise of correcting that, coeducation? And seventy percent or something said yes, if the academic standards were at stake. All the rest of them were very clearly opposed to coeducation, the undergraduates. We had the law school experience of seven or eight or ten years, whatever it was.

At any rate, the student body were opposed, and that was interesting because I was having dinners with seniors all through that spring, twenty-five at a time, and I would go around the table with them and say, "Tell me what's good about Washington and Lee and what's bad about Washington and Lee, and you tell me also what are you attitudes about women at Washington and Lee."

I would have almost no one stand and say, "Well, I really think women should be admitted here. It would make life a lot more pleasant for everybody, etc., etc., and probably improve the student body." One kid, to my astonishment, actually said, "I didn't know it was an all-male place 'til I arrived. I went to the chapel for the freshman class meeting, and I looked around and to my astonishment there wasn't a single women in the class." He said, "The catalog was full of pictures of women, and I had never visited. It never occurred to me that it was an all-male place." [Laughter]

But the next day after one of these dinners, I would have one or two come by and say, "You know, I didn't speak up last night, but I wanted you to know that I think, and a lot of my friends think also, that this isn't quite as open and shut a case as some of the people you heard last night."

See, what I learned was, the students were imprisoned in loyalty. If they stood up and said fundamental things of this sort should take place, they were in effect saying, "There's something wrong here, and it needs fixing, and this would be a way to try to fix it." And they didn't want to say that, especially in front of each other. But they made it clear to me, a little note sometimes.

At one stage, I asked the faculty to write to me, in a personal way, their attitude about this prospect, and I had over 100 replies. I think the faculty, if you took the physical

education coaches and so on out and the librarians who have faculty rank, put them to one side, the faculty, with the law school, might have numbered 120, 130. So we had almost all the faculty.

I separated the responses from faculty who were also alumni, and there were many, twenty or twenty-five alumni who had gone off and taken their Ph.D.s and come back, people like Sidney Coulling and Jay Cook and Steve Stephenson and a number of other people like that, so that the board would have this notebook of letters which separated the regular faculty—not regular, but the faculty who were not undergraduates of Washington and Lee—from these others. I said, "These others I want you to pay special attention to, because they knew the institution you knew. And now they've watched it over these years, and the faculty." And that was terribly helpful.

**Warren:** What response did you get from the faculty?

**Wilson:** Oh, it was ninety-plus percent saying this should happen, this is very important that it should happen. I couldn't have won this. I couldn't have survived, I'll put it that way, the coed debate, if I hadn't had the faculty. I mean, I didn't have the alumni. I nominally didn't have the students. I really needed some support somewhere, and the faculty was clearly an important part of that.

I took the staff up on the mountain to Skylark, too, by the way, the administrative staff. We had a retreat up there in the summer of '83, when I said, "Am I stepping into a great chasm here by even asking for the study to go forward?" Everyone up there, which included graduates of Washington and Lee, like Lew John and Farris Hotchkiss and—I'm trying to think who they all were. I think Bill McHenry might have been then athletic director up there. There were ten or twelve people I was meeting with, and only Bill Washburn said no, and he was accurately reflecting his alumni constituency, because he was the director of alumni programs then, or whatever we called it. Bill McHenry was wishy-washy. I wouldn't put it that way in any article. But I think he'd rather things remained the way they were, but if we decided, then, of course, in earnest, they would go forward with women's programs, which they clearly did. So I had a lot of support at home.

Now, going out on the road was very different. When we went out to speak to alumni clubs, it was the first time they'd seen me, a lot of them, and here I am talking about coeducation and the study going forward. At the Congressional Country Club up in Washington, I remember a terrible evening. Alumni were actually quarreling with each other out in the audience. I was speaking, and maybe somebody raised his hand and I recognized him. He nominally addressed me, but he was answered by somebody else out

there. Holy tamale, it was really not very pleasant, you know, because their feelings were so sharp.

Farris and I touched down in Shreveport, Louisiana, for a meeting there. Farris learned over just as we were ready to come to the gate and he said, "You know, John, this may be the toughest alumni meeting you will ever address. They are very conservative people here, and they're not at all sympathetic with the introduction of women."

I said, "Why are you telling me this? I can't avoid the meeting. It's too late." [Laughter]

So I went down to the whatever country club to meet with the Shreveport alumni. "Dr. Wilson, we're so pleased to have you in Shreveport. We do look forward to coming to know you better."

The next person, "Dr. Wilson, how can we welcome you more warmly than we have?"

Then they go to Farris, "What in the hell is he up to?"

But then I sat down at the head table, and I sat next to a charming lady whose husband was presiding. He was president of the local club. Fireson [phonetic] is his last name. She's Ivy. I can't think of this guy's first name. But anyway, I know him very well and I know Ivy very well. [Unclear], deep, rich Southern accent.

I said, "Ivy, where did you go to college?" at one point in the conversation.

"Oh, Dr. Wilson," she said, "I went to Sewanee."

I said, "You went to Sewanee! Why, you must have been one of the early coed classes at Sewanee."

"I was in the very first coed class at Sewanee."

I said, "You were! Well, tell me, how did you make that decision?"

"Oh, Dr. Wilson," she said, "my brothers went to Sewanee, my daddy went to Sewanee, and my granddaddy helped found Sewanee. I found it a great privilege that they opened the doors finally to permit women in the family to enjoy that same tradition."

I thought, "This is an easy situation."

Part of what made this all come about as reasonably as it did was that people discovered that they had daughters, and they hadn't thought of it that way before.

One of the trustees, when we sat there on Bastille Day and were about to vote, Jim Ballengee said, "I'm going to go all the way around the table one more time and everyone is going to speak his mind and his heart on this subject, and then we will go back around and actually cast a vote."

So he started down. One gentleman said, "You know, I didn't sleep a wink all last night. I paced the floor."

"Yes, I was below you. I heard you."

Another one stood up and said, "You know, the worst day in my life was the day I suddenly realized that, by policy, my daughters were not going to be permitted to share in what I had so much enjoyed myself, but my sons declined to do so because they did not wish to go to a single-sex college."

I said two things before the vote. I said to the board, "I am 51 years old. I am able. I'm not worried about my future. I will try to work your will, whichever it is, but I'm perfectly well aware that it may not be possible for me to be very effective if this vote should be turned down. But I don't want you to worry about that. Take me out of this vote. No votes aye because you don't want to isolate me or appear to repudiate me. That would be the worst possible thing. Vote the issue. Don't vote me. I can survive, whether here or whether somewhere else."

"Secondly, let's agree— " And I hadn't thought this through, nor had I politicked this. You can ask any trustee then sitting if I ever called and said, "How do you feel about this? Will you vote on Saturday next, etc.?" I had no idea in many, many of these cases. I knew who was opposed from correspondence and earlier conversations in board meetings and so on. But the [unclear], a lot of them, kept their views to themselves until they finally had to make the decision.

The second thing I said is, "Let's not decide a matter of this moment to the whole community at Washington and Lee by a simple majority. I don't think that would be fair."

One who was opposed said, "What do you have in mind, John? Two-thirds?"

I thought, "Uh-oh. He's counting." [Laughter] I haven't; he has. I said, "Well, I don't know. That sounds reasonable to me."

Then another trustee said, "But we have a bylaw that says that whenever we have a quorum, a simple majority prevails and does the work of the board. How are we going to get around that?"

Jim Ballengee said, "I think those of us who vote aye, who vote yes, and find ourselves with a simple majority will agree beforehand to change our vote in a subsequent vote so we can avoid the problem."

There's one more point worth mentioning, and that is that there were two trustees who weren't able to be there, one because of illness, Alzheimer's disease, and one because he was in Ireland, where he had a summer home, Hal Clarke from Atlanta, and Hal wanted to vote from Ireland by telephone.

Al, from Lexington, North Carolina, Al—it'll come. His wife wanted him to vote. She represented him as keenly interested in this and would feel awful if he couldn't participate. This is confidential. His son called me in the meantime and said, "If you let

my father vote, you're crazy, because he hasn't had any capacity to think seriously about this question in the last several years."

**Warren:** This is the man with Alzheimer's?

**Wilson:** Yes. I said, "Well, it's better to let him vote, even though they're both negative votes." I knew they were both "no" votes. So we started out with two no's by telephone.

Then we started around. Right on my left, there were two no's out of the first three. I thought it was a dead deal, I really honestly did at that point. But counting the two in absentia votes, there were seven negatives and seventeen positives, so we just made a two-thirds standard.

I give Jim Ballengee a lot of credit for the way that whole business was managed, the study. I give Edgar Shannon a lot of credit the way he managed the Academic Affairs Committee as chairman, and a lot of the questions there, admission, student quality, course enrollment by sex, and things of that sort had to be thrashed out. We studied Princeton and Franklin Marshall and other places to see if enrollment in economics stayed the same as a percentage or whether they changed, things of that sort. He managed all that. Of course, the University of Virginia admitted women to the undergraduate program in 1970, I think, and Edgar was president still at that time, so he was very helpful. There were a lot of helpful people around that table. It was a heartfelt and deeply emotional meeting.

Then we went over to the commerce school for a press conference after we had voted aye and were going forward, and the chief opponent, in the sense of having the most strongly held views and also being as well prepared and thoughtful as he could possibly be on the subject, was Chris Compton, Virginia's Supreme Court justice. Chris came over and sat at the table with Jim Ballengee and with me as the press began to ask questions, and he said, "I frankly acknowledge that I opposed this motion and I voted against it, but there will be no member of this board that will ardently support it and will work to make it successful than will I." That started the healing process a little bit.

**Warren:** That story gives me chills just hearing it.

**Wilson:** But, you see, we didn't know also how many women there would be who would be interested.

**Warren:** What kind of response did you get?

**Wilson:** Well, the first year, in '85, we had 750 or so applications from women, and they were strong. They were from Washington and Lee people. We wanted one hundred women students the first year. The second year it went to nine hundred-and-some; the third year it went to twelve hundred-and-some; the fourth year, fifteen hundred-and-

some. I mean, the applications just kept coming, and they turned out to be from the same background, sometimes the same families, really, of our young men.

The first class was outstanding, the class of '89. They were superb the way they didn't come in and say, "Wait a minute," you know. They went along. They had a patience. They kind of turned their backs on the more outrageous "no Marthas" kind of attitude that some of the fraternities had, some of the fraternities, for example. And their function, too, their nature, when they reflect a kind of superficial masculine macho attitude about things, they also have a capacity to continue these attitudes from one generation to another, so it takes longer than four years to sort of change the system. It takes them seven to eight years to start flushing out the memory of "the way it used to be."

"How do you know?"

"When I was a freshman, my senior brother was the last non-coed class, and he told me." [Laughter]

But anyway, there were some fraternities who would not invite Washington and Lee women to social nights, for example, for a while. It didn't last long. They would sort of aggressively announce that they were roadrunners, they went been down the road for their social life. Women were welcomed from Hollins and Sweet Briar and Mary Baldwin. But our gals, they were so bright, so good-looking, so attractive, they blew that off without any problem, as they say.

**Warren:** I'm interested in this idea that the first year you wanted a hundred. There was a set number for each year?

**Wilson:** No. The board said, "John, what do you anticipate the enrollment pattern change?" We didn't really talk too much about this in Academic Affairs Committee, but we did some.

I said, "I don't know how many applications we're going to have. I don't know what the quality of the applications will be, comparatively or absolutely. I do know that after ten years, Princeton is still at sixty-six percent male applications, thirty-five percent female, and [unclear] is sixty-forty and somebody else is 57-43 after ten or twelve years. So I said, "I would think we'll be doing well if we got to five hundred women." We had 1,350 men. I said, "My proposal would be, let's reduce 1,350 to 1,000 and raise from zero to five hundred the number of women in ten years' time. If we can do that, that would be a good achievement. Then we'll make our changes in dormitories and things in an evolutionary fashion."

**Warren:** What were those changes? What had to be done to make ready for this?

**Wilson:** Very little, very little. I mean, it was amazing how little there was. Major physical renovation was in the gymnasium locker room. We had to partition, of course,

down the middle so we had equal number of lockers on each—well, actually not equal because there were more men than women anticipated, and that cost some money. But I got a check from a member of the class of 1915 called Will Smith—1915. He was in his nineties, in other words. And he just sent a check. He didn't send a letter. On the memo line of the check it said, "To help with the girls," and it was fifty thousand bucks from Ardmore, Oklahoma. I went out to see Will Smith, obviously, and thank him and come to know him a little bit, and he said, "You know, I came to Virginia. My father—all of us here were in Oklahoma territory." It wasn't even a state then. "He bundled us on a train when our education time came, and we all went out east to Richmond. I got off the train at Richmond with my brothers and sisters. We were in homemade clothes. There weren't any stores." But the father was in cattle and later in oil, and he was a successful man. But nonetheless, that was the condition of things.

He said, "I went to Randolph-Macon Academy up here at Front Royal for three or four years, and then I came to Washington and Lee, and it was the best four years of my life, 1911 to 1915, with one exception: there was no opportunity to meet wholesome young women." I've never forgotten that phrase—wholesome young women.

So he said, "I'm very pleased about that, finally after all these years seeing that corrected, and I hope you can use that fifty thousand [dollars]."

I used that to change the gym room. He was a jock, too. He was a little guy, but he—

**Warren:** That's a wonderful story.

**Wilson:** Yeah, it is a great story.

**Warren:** I'll be real surprised if that doesn't make it into the book. That's a wonderful story.

**Wilson:** Will Smith didn't live much longer than that, but he did have a chance to have an impact.

Then the other things, in the dormitories we had to change rest rooms from one sex to another, but that's a relatively simple thing to do, especially if you don't take the plumbing out, you just cover them with vanities. You make urinals—this is against the law, of course. You just build a plywood vanity over the plumbing. They're still there.

The major thing in terms of change was programmatic in athletic. We had to start out and create, as it turned out, nine or ten varsity teams in a relatively short period of time. These young women who arrived in the class of '89, there were only one hundred of them, and they wanted a soccer team, immediately. The athletic people said, "You can't do that. It takes thirty to thirty-five people to make a squad so you can play against each other and have a few substitutes. That would be a third of your class."

They said, "We'll get a third of our class." They must have dragooned these poor young ladies who'd never seen a soccer ball to get out. It was just remarkable how that whole success story on the athletic side has been just superb, our tennis team and our soccer team.

**Warren:** Tell me about it.

**Wilson:** Well, it's all there in the record. You can look at it. But the parity of esteem and the parity in terms of success of our athletic teams. Cross-country, I think of Josephine and all those gals. The tennis team was third in the nation last year. Swimming is outstanding. They get along well. They travel together.

I give Page Remillard a lot of credit for the way he's kept the men's and women's programs in parity. And Jan has been a wonderful addition, Jan Hathorn, with both her lacrosse and soccer teams, which had a lot of success. I mean, I'm talking now not simply about wins and losses, but that's one measurement, but also the spirit and the morale.

You know, there's one thing about athletic teams that most people don't stop to think about, and that is that as a freshman class arrives, there is a need to socialize then into the community and to connect. That's one of the rationalizations for Greek systems, that you pledge and you get to know upperclassmen in a number of houses when you're rushing or whatever you go through. And then you join a house, after the nonsense, you're immediately a part of the community of all four classes, plus alumni. You have an instant connection.

Well, athletic team works exactly the same way, but without all the nonsense, all the rushing and Hell Week and whatever, all that stuff that VMI's now learned to do without. Neither has a Greek system house. But the athletic team admits that freshman into a community of people with shared interests, and they travel together and they play together and they turn out to be very close with each other. That's been a great help.

**Warren:** I'd like to turn to another subject. I had the pleasure the other night of attending the Christmas concert at the Lenfest Center, and I know that that happened during your administration, too. Tell me about the Lenfest Center. Why was that important and how did it come to be?

**Wilson:** I believe very strongly in the efficacy of the arts and the efficacy measured in—let me start again. The question is, how do you develop powers of empathy? How do you cultivate the emotional side of human personality in constructive ways? How do you teach compassion?

I don't mean to make this sound as stilted as I'm sure it's beginning to sound. But when I was a young man, I would sit at home listening to either—because my mother was an opera person—Texaco Opera on Saturday afternoons on the radio or we had records,

and music was very much a part of my—and sometimes you'd sit there and almost weep with the joy of it. It's a powerful language. It's difficult to talk about because it can't communicate in quite the same way as verbal forms do, poetry or prose. I've always thrilled, is the right word, to language. I remember Manley Hopkins, the first time I read his poetry as a kid, I remember actually physically feeling this emotion.

The music does that, too. I'm known mostly in Lexington as a Mahler nut. In fact, the board, one of the great gifts I got when I retired, Anne and I were sent to Amsterdam to hear Mahler's Second Symphony which was being played, because the Second is especially moving, an especially wonderful piece of music, in my opinion. Anyway, I put that tape in the car when I'm by myself and turn the volume up and listen to that last movement, and I find myself weeping, driving down the road.

Washington and Lee—and this is true of a lot of all-male places—had a very modest—Rob Stewart was the first appointment in music. And I've talked about music here, but theater has a parallel place in the moral instruction of the young. Rob Stewart was the first appointment in music, and we didn't have very much. Of course, since that time, Gordon Spice is on board and there was a man called Cook who taught piano. That was about it. In theater, Al was there, of course. I think Tom Ziegler was there.

But at any rate, the music was performed in Lee Chapel, which acoustically is very nice, every other way awful, especially for a large group. You can't get a group on that little platform. And the theater was done in the Troubadour, and some remarkable things were done there, but you could only exit the stage one side, and it seated a hundred, if you were lucky, and it had a stage [the size] of a thimble. How they did as well as they did, I'll never know.

In the seventies—Frank can tell you about this—there was a strong feeling that the arts had to be regenerated and a physical environment had to be created for it. Bob Huntley actually had it on his list of things that should be done in that seventies campaign, which turned out to be a sixty-seven million dollar campaign, but they never got to it. So I inherited what, in fact, turned easily to be something that I was totally enthusiastic about anyway—the obligation to provide a suitable place for the arts at Washington and Lee.

We had on the planning board, as it were, a 300-seat theater for drama, nothing for music, and that was one of the difficult negotiating points with Al. I wanted the auditorium larger for musical events. There was a good argument advanced that you'd spoil a theater if you try to make it multipurpose and that they didn't want more than three hundred seats because they wanted a play to run for several nights and we would exhaust an audience.

**Warren:** In Lexington.

**Wilson:** With 485 seats. So anyway, to make a long story short, we had to negotiate all that. I said, in effect, to myself and to Al, I guess, and to Rob Stewart and Gordon that we would only have once chance to do this. We wouldn't have a chance to do two theaters.

**Warren:** Good point.

**Wilson:** Not in the foreseeable future, anyway. So they could work out a way to share these spaces, experimental theater in a large auditorium. So we started out, really, before the campaign to raise the money for this, and we asked key people to contribute to it. I remember sitting with Christolph and Polly Keller down in Louisiana, and they gave eight hundred thousand dollars, for example. Then the wonderful story about Gerry himself coming up for his '53 reunion.

**Warren:** Let's switch the tape to get that.

[Begin Tape 2, Side 1]

**Warren:** This is tape two with John Wilson.

**Warren:** Gerry Lenfest came by for his—I think it was thirty-fifth reunion, class of '53. It must have been '88. Frank Parsons was asked to have dinner with the class. You know, at reunion time all the classes are having banquets at the same time, and so we split ourselves out, and Frank had the assignment. He mentioned in passing, I think, at the class of '53 that we had a project under planning, but we didn't have it fully funded yet, and that we wouldn't be able to go forward until the funding were visible.

Afterward, he [Gerry Lenfest] said to Frank, "Frank, what are you short?"

Frank said, "Well, it looks like as much as three million dollars."

He said, "Why don't you ask the president to come up to Philadelphia as soon as he can and we can talk about it."

So Farris and I got in our own little car not very long after that and met with Gerry and Marguerite Lenfest at a restaurant in downtown Philadelphia. Gerry said, "Look, I think we ought to get the business part of this over with before we have lunch, because this is a wonderful restaurant and I want you to enjoy this lunch. I understand you have a three million dollar shortfall in the funds that you have committed to this project." It was a ten million dollar project.

I said, "Yes, sir, and we just can't go forward with that kind of gap."

He said, "Marguerite, what do you think?"

She said, "Gerry, it's your money. You do with it what you want." Can you imagine Marguerite, wonderful gal. "You do with it whatever you want."

He said, "Okay, I'll donate three million. Now let's have lunch." [Laughter]

I said, "You sure know how to make a guy relax," instead of having to sit there and worry the whole lunch through.

That was a successful building design, by the way. Way, way back, Bob Huntley had appointed a San Antonio firm to design this thing, because a San Antonio alumnus had said, "If you hire Ford Powell Carson, I'll pay the architect's fee to work up some idea." This is a three hundred-seat theater.

Well, they had a building designed to fit onto that lot with the fly loft on the corner. In other words, you had nothing but sheer brick. You know, as you walk along the creek and look up, that would have been on the corner. It also incorporated the old building as a lobby, the railroad station building. It all stood on this side of the railroad track embankment, this side meaning toward the town side. It's a small building, but a huge great fly loft.

Meanwhile, Gaines Hall was being designed, so we asked Eddie Smith of Marcellus Wright Cox & Smith to take a look at this building that we all thought was wrong. Eddie started to look at the whole—I said, "I want this to be a main intersection of the university, a new entryway, as it were, and we'll take the curse off the Warner Center." I asked to get as much greenery going up it as we possibly can all the time. Gaines Hall sits where a gas station used to be, you may remember, and a Coca-Cola bottling plant. Across the street were abandoned oil and gas tanks. I mean, oil tanks, I guess they were, great big Exxon tanks sitting out front. I said, "Let's try to permanentize this whole entryway. I also want an announcement that this is the university, so I'd like to see some signs, Washington and Lee University, 1749, etc."

That didn't come out quite the way I wanted it. We had the two lines, the Lenfest Center line and the Warner Center line, where the trees were planted profusely on that side hall. I wanted to see green there, spotlights. Anyway, we got most of it done.

Then [unclear] had this—what are you going to call it? I'd better be careful. I can't think of anybody anymore. Fred—

**Warren:** Fred Cox?

**Wilson:** No, Fred Hadsel. Fred's wife. Winifred, Winifred Hadsel didn't think much of the building. She called it neo-something or other.

We wanted very much to get a touch of the colonnade in it, and that's why we have the cupola and the columns. I said, "I want this to be a gatehouse. I don't want it to be a rotunda. We're not taking on Charlottesville. This is going to be an Anglo-Saxon thing, a gatehouse. I don't want a rotunda, a Roman thing."

So when Lenfest came along, I said, "Eddie, reach across the street and pick up some elements here and work with Ford Carson (I've forgotten the architect's name now,

funny, a few years have passed) to eke out another focal point, entryway." That's going to be repeated, by the way, on the tennis pavilion underway at the moment.

And then he did some very nice things there architecturally. I mean, these people came up with the idea of using the old railroad right-of-ways, the crosswalk, and then to have that non-functional entryway, but it does distribute crowds up and down and faculty on the second floor. I give Frank a lot of credit for whatever he said about the arts, but Gerry's just spontaneous generosity. He added two more million to that before it was over to help endow it.

**Warren:** One of the things I was very impressed with at the Christmas concert was that the place was packed.

**Wilson:** Oh, it's always packed.

**Warren:** It was full, and I just thought that was wonderful. They weren't familiar faces, and I know a lot of people in town. There just seemed to be all kinds of people there.

**Wilson:** Well, that Christmas concert is a very popular one, but it never really filled in Lee Chapel, never. We had a lot of nice things go on in Lee Chapel that no one came to. It's hard to get to, to park, and the seating was very uncomfortable. And if you had a chorus of any size, you couldn't put them on the stage, and you had platforms that extended over the first two rows, the seats there.

It was acoustically pretty good. I was a little fearful in my heart of hearts that we'd build a wonderful new performing arts center, but that some music faculty member will say, "I prefer Lee Chapel for the acoustics. I don't give a damn whether anybody's comfortable or anybody comes." I could just see that purist view. But we got some good acoustics by luck in Lenfest. If we hadn't, I suspect we would have had a real problem.

Of course, the theaters have [done] some wonderful things there, too. In the large building, too. I thought that "The Skin of our Teeth," the Wilder thing a few years ago, was really first-rate. And then "Evita" was beyond belief. You didn't see "Evita."

**Warren:** No, I wasn't here. That's quite something to take on.

**Wilson:** Oh, gosh. We had people from Hollywood here, alums, writers and producers, and they said this is clearly a professional level.

Before they left, last May they did a salute to us in the Lenfest Center, and they brought back people who had performed in these outstanding things in Lenfest since it was created. They had a scene from "Evita," in effect, musically reproduced. It was just wonderful. There have been some great, great things that have combined both music and theater, and theater by itself alone, that just are memorable, and it's brought town and university together.

See, the tennis pavilion will do the same thing. People don't realize that. But here at VPI, they've got six indoor courts. I'm a key member of this community in terms of belonging to the VPI Tennis Club, or whatever they call it. You pay X amount of dollars per term to belong to the club and then you pay court time. We're grateful to have the chance to do that. That's going to happen at Washington and Lee, I'm sure. It will be something that the townsfolk will—the varsity will use it in the late afternoon and on weekends when they have matches and so on or when visitors are coming down and you can't play outside. There will be a lot of student use and there will be a lot of town use of that facility. That will be another plus.

**Warren:** What about the relationship between the university and the town?

**Wilson:** I suppose we should say the city.

**Warren:** The city.

**Wilson:** I think that Buddy has been really good.

**Warren:** Buddy Derrick, the mayor.

**Wilson:** Yeah. He's a lovely person. Before, Charles Phillips was mayor for twelve or fourteen years, you know, and was a key member of our faculty. He was, of course, the facilitator when it came to town-gown relationships. I think David Howison has been good, and he created, with the town manager, a forum for monthly meetings between officers of the city and officers and students of the university. Our relationship with Chief [of police] Beard has been good, and David has done a lot with Mike and others to increase the mutual confidence in how things will interact.

You have two thousand young people, 1,625 of whom are undergraduates, and there's an awful lot of energy and there's an awful lot of parking congestion and things of that sort that people resent, and everybody takes turns saying at vacation time, "This is the new Lexington. What a wonderful thing. There aren't any students around."

The merchants know better. In fact, I once, talking to Martha Lou Derrick, said, "Martha Lou, what percentage of your business would you attribute to Washington and Lee? A third?"

"Oh," she said, "it would be more than that." I have no idea what it was, but it was more than a third.

Most people realize that, first of all, the students, though they will put a strain on day-to-day life in the city, are key financial or economic powers of the community's success. The two institutions create a wonderful resource for the community to enjoy, and I think most people appreciate that.

Why did I move to Blacksburg? I needed to leave Lexington because I needed to give room to John to flourish, one. And two, I came to Blacksburg because it's a

university town. We wanted to live in a small town, which would be unbearable if it weren't a university town. There would be no music, there would be no theater, there would be no lectures coming from abroad, as it were. There would be no athletic events to attend. I mean, the quality of life that an institution of higher learning gives not only to itself, but also to the surrounding populations, is really very, very remarkable. I think some people sort of take it for granted in Lexington, but that's inevitable.

I felt sometimes that we were underappreciated and that VMI got far too much credit. They commandeered a platoon to go over to Buena Vista to help mop out after one of the floods, you know. The newspapers were full of it. And yet our kids were doing some good things, too. We never seemed to get credit for anything but the Saturday night rumble. But that's kind of because I was sensitive about it.

**Warren:** I don't want to bring up a sore subject, but speaking of Saturday night rumbles, there's one story that Frank asked me to get your point of view on. I wish we'd done this back when we were talking about these things, because we've been talking about such pleasant things now. He said that there was a bottle-throwing incident, and that's all I needed to say to you, that you would know exactly what I was referring to. What happened there?

**Wilson:** This was a very great disappointment to me because it came right in the wake of our renovation of two of our houses, SAE and Phi Si next to it. On that little stretch, you have also Pi Phi down at the corner. I can never keep them straight, Pi Phi, SAE, and Phi Si.

**Warren:** I'm glad I'm not the only one who can't keep them all straight.

**Wilson:** Kappa Sig had a little white house in there which had become the Outing Club center now. There used to be a fair amount of antagonism that would arise.

**Warren:** Where is this?

**Wilson:** On Washington Street. Keep going right up Washington Street toward the shopping area up there. Past the police station on your left, there are these big houses. SAE is the white one, and next to it is a lovely brick house with a curved entryway. The staircase curves up to the door.

**Warren:** This is near city hall?

**Wilson:** Yes. We just finished SAE, and that was a very expensive renovation, one of the most expensive, nine hundred-and-some thousand. Actually, it touched a million, but the alums kicked in for a grand piano or something. I think we could say honestly it was 999 or something.

Anyway, and Phi Si was not done yet. A house mother had moved into an apartment in SAE on the Phi Si side of the house, and SAE kid—he turned out to be a

really nice boy—came home, probably with a few beers too many in his system, but he just had an instinct to reach down and throw a bottle through the window of the Phi Si house. It shattered glass across the room. There was a party going on, but it was all over the house. There wasn't any specific—nobody was hurt. Two or three were made angry. And so these two guys came out and started to rain bottles on the SAE house, and one of them went right through the window of the housemother's apartment living room, which must have terrorized her. I don't mean frightened her. I mean, what would you think? You're a sixty-five or seventy-year-old house mother, newly appointed to SAE, newly renovated house, and somebody throws a bottle. It's a felony. You throw a projectile through a window, after dark especially, an occupied thing.

Anyway, the next few days were taken up with the worst bit of stonewalling I've ever encountered. No one in either house would say, "We'll take care of it. We're paying for the damages." That was the traditional way for fraternities to fix these things, "We're going to pay for the window."

I was beside myself with the prospect of these guys thinking there was nothing exceptional about this kind of behavior and that it was something you could fix up just because they both had enough money to fix it up. They wouldn't tell us who was involved. They just said, "This is something we can to leave to the fraternity system."

I said, "I'm not leaving it to the fraternity system." I called in Murph. I said, "Murph, I want you to find out who these three people were."

About ten minutes later, he came back with their names. So I said, "I want them to be brought in here serially. I don't want them to come at once. I don't want them to have an opportunity to talk to each other. So you get one."

He took one off the baseball field—he was practicing—and brought him to me. I simply said, "Did you or did you not throw a bottle through the so-and-so?"

"Yes, sir, I did."

I said, "Go over there to my telephone on the desk, dial 1, your father's area code number and his office number, and tell him on the telephone that you've just been suspended from the university for the rest of the year by the president and that he is here if you want to talk with him."

The kid went over, dialed 1, dialed the area code. He put it back down and he said, "Couldn't we talk about this a little bit more?"

I'm making a point here, and that is that we often overlook the powerful influence that parents can have. They're very rarely brought into these things, and I know it's gauche to do that. But I thought it wouldn't be bad to have the parents aware of what was happening.

The next kid who came in called his home, and unfortunately his mother wasn't there and he told his sister that he was in deep trouble at the university, and she just alarmed the mother something awful. That backfired.

At any rate, we suspended them for the remainder of that semester, so they lost the semester's work. Students were outraged, fraternity students, which consisted of hundreds. I mean, 550 showed up at Lee Chapel, hanging over the edges of the balcony to talk with me about this. The high-minded theme, of course, was that I had circumvented the judicial system that was in place and that if I had wanted to do so, why didn't I call this to the attention of the judicial board of the Interfraternity Council.

It was a little hard to stand up and say, "Well, that has never worked. It is a buffer. It is a protective device to keep the import and significance of these acts from ever having to be encountered."

Anyway, it was a very uncomfortable evening in the chapel as I tried to explain to these young people that we were not going to tolerate things like that and that I had a responsibility that superseded any of the other and that there was a clause somewhere in the constitution of the university that said in the event of a significant threat to the welfare of the institution, the president could suspend or expel, and that I thought it was that serious.

Well, that didn't go down well. I knew they had to have a kind of cathartic evening, and so I just sort of steeled myself to absorb such animosity as there was in the building. One of them was especially a vituperative type up here on the left, and he asked all kinds of aggressive questions. I found out it was Mason Pope, who was one of the best running backs that we'd ever had around there. I couldn't see who he was, or I wouldn't have recognized him anyway.

I called Mason in the next day. I said, "Come on down. I'll talk to you." And we had a wonderful hour and a half. He was very candid, and he hadn't relaxed his view, but we had an opportunity to exchange views, somewhat less pressured. Of course, I told him I admired his play on the field, and I was very pleased to get to know him a little bit better. I didn't have any of this stuff hanging on the walls of my office, you can be sure. My wife did all this stuff.

But anyway, he found out that I wasn't quite the ogre that he had worked it out that I probably was. Interestingly enough, years later I'm writing letters of recommendation for Mason. He's doing very well in New York in the financial business in a brokerage house. But anyway, that was one of those things.

In the front row of that Lee Chapel event were the officers of the two houses involved, plus the IFC and the Greek, and, you know, I just didn't feel they had got it, that

they hadn't really picked up on what was happening. They were going to whitewash this thing, and the arrogance of saying it's none of my business, in effect, who did it, we'll handle that, was almost too much to bear. The faculty, without my ever even raising the matter in the faculty meeting, somebody came in with a resolution, "We totally support you," and everybody passed it unanimously.

**Warren:** Did you see this as a threat to the whole renaissance program?

**Wilson:** I did. I thought it would the start of an unraveling of the whole investment, the whole community, right back to business as usual, except you had a lady in there you'd appointed to help set a tone and a style, had her assaulted in that indirect way. She could have been sitting there. It wouldn't have made the slightest difference.

**Warren:** Was that the end of serious problems? Did anything else occur?

**Wilson:** Nothing like that. This breaking windows thing just made me sick. I'm from a very modest family background. My father was a blue-collar sort of guy who worked in the machine tool and die thing near the auto industry in Michigan. We didn't have much.

But, my gosh, the idea of these people wasting the world's goods. I would come on a Monday and I would see our B&G guys, who don't have much in the world, and gals, cleaning up after. There would be broken windows in the dormitory. They would come back from the fraternities, having destroyed the house all night, and then knock out a few windows in the dormitory. The windows they knocked out were always in the public sector, the staircases, not their own rooms. So then they would plead, if you ever found out who did it, they would plead alcohol; they had been too drunk to govern their own behavior. But they weren't. I said, "You weren't drunk enough not to make the distinction between a public and a private space in the dormitory. Don't give me that."

This would sicken me on Sunday morning when I would walk around there and I'd look up and see Graham-Lees windows out from people coming back from an orgy. That's too strong a term, but unregulated party. During this whole period, we went from 18 years old to 21 years old. That was not—

**Warren:** Tell me about that. When did that happen? I've been trying to track that down.

**Wilson:** I wouldn't trust my memory. It would be around the time the pavilion was built, because we built the pavilion. We thought we'll help ease the strain on the fraternities by having an on-campus place where we can have parties and we can govern the awful possibility of high school kids coming in. They were going into the fraternity houses and drinking. Grain alcohol was the drink of preference, and high school girls, sixteen-year-olds, it didn't matter. We would have more control over it.

We no sooner built the pavilion than the laws of the state of Virginia changed to twenty-one, and for a while there we thought, "Gosh, we've got a white elephant," albeit

not a major facility. We could use it athletically, we could use it for other purposes, but it was a place that they didn't want to go to socialize because three-fourths of them couldn't have anything to drink there, and the ABC had rules about that. If the audience could be predicted to be less than half eligible to drink, than you couldn't have alcohol at all and things of that sort.

So it was around the time the pavilion was built, I'd say '85, '86.

**Warren:** One thing that I have been interested in, in studying the student handbooks, there comes a time, right about that time, where a very definitive policy on alcohol suddenly appears. Prior to that, there had been a policy on drugs, and it was as if alcohol was not part of the scene. I mean, it just wasn't addressed. And then suddenly there was this very long involved policy on alcohol. Where does a policy like that come from?

**Wilson:** There were a number of—Lew John probably served in the deanship until about '89. I think David came '89 or '90, somewhere there. Lew made the case to me, as did many professional people across the country, that alcohol was a more serious problem than drugs. I said, "You guys are all saying that only because you're scared of drugs, just as I am." It's far more comforting to say something familiar like alcohol is the major problem. Forget cocaine, which none of us knew anything about from our own experience and so on. But Lew had a very strong perception that alcohol was our number-one problem.

We had an agency, something like the University Health Committee, which now David has, which promulgates proposed policy on a whole number of fronts, but certainly alcohol abuse is one such. There's just simply been an awful lot of national attention paid to this in the last few years. Harvard did a big study and the University of Michigan has counterstudies going on, and everybody's taking the pulse of what turns out to be a study of binge drinking, bingeing or whatever the participial form would be.

On the board side, there never was a standing committee on campus life, another change we made. We created a standing committee on campus life, and they heard every need from the dean of students and from student leaders on a whole range of things, fraternities and athletics and social life and so on. That's been helpful. Tom Touchton, again, was very strongly favorable toward strengthening our stated policy with respect to alcohol. He chaired that committee for a while.

**Warren:** Did establishing that policy make a difference?

**Wilson:** Well, no. You know, who reads them? The official documents of the university, maybe before you come here you—

**Warren:** I may be the only one who's read all of them.

**Wilson:** The student handbook may be read by freshmen, but they don't consult it every year after they get here. But insofar as it helps you in the steps that you take in the daily administration of the affairs of the institution, well, we've got a policy. The administration, after all, must implement the policies of the board. So that's helpful. And I am very sure that David has pointed it out many times to student leaders.

I think it was the last year I was there, we had a meeting in 114 in the Student Center, whatever you call it, Evans. Not Evans, but whatever the rest of that is called. Anyway, he had the dean of students' staff there. He had the infirmary director there, and she was very effective, by the way. And students who were involved. And there was a discussion about the threat to this generation, not just ours, that alcohol represented, and he asked me to say a few words that night, which I did. So you had a policy that served there as a backstop or as a reflection what it is you try to do in day-to-day life.

You have in David, too—I mean, I don't want to say anything negative about Lew's time, but he was dean for nearly twenty years. This is off the record, but Danny Murphy was the associate in his office at that time for Greek affairs, fraternity concerns. Danny hadn't been in any of these houses ever. I said, "Danny, I don't understand. I want to have meetings with the officers of all the houses, and I want you to come with me when I go down and talk about the management of these houses or what their budget looks like, how they go about pledging. I want to know everything I can know about."

He said, "I've never been in these houses."

I said, "What prompted you to decide not to do that?"

He said, "Because I'm on the Student Judicial Committee (or whatever it is, some group that finally adjudicates individual infractions), I felt it would be wrong to get to know them too well because I may have to judge them."

I said, "What do fathers do? You know them and you love them, but you also discipline them, and I don't see a contradiction in that role." There were things like that students had fallen into. It was easier not to go down there and face this stuff.

But anyway, yeah, the policy helps and reflects the board's concern. The board is the ultimate authority for all the things that matter at the institution. It doesn't exercise that authority, except through the administration and the faculty, ninety-nine percent of the time. The faculty have significant delegated powers when it comes to student life at Washington and Lee.

**Warren:** Is that unusual?

**Wilson:** Well, it may be true at other places, but it's never exercised. The more the faculty can forget about student life, the happier they are in most places.

**Warren:** But that's not true at Washington and Lee?

**Wilson:** No, I don't think it is. You've got faculty involved in what used to be the Confidential Review Committee, which is now called something else. It handles confidential matters like sexual assault and sexual misbehavior. What is it called? They changed its name the last year or so. I've just flushed my mind of all those things.
**Warren:** That's happening with all those things that occasionally people call me from the Archives and ask me a question, and I say, "I'm sorry, it's all been replaced with Washington and Lee stuff." I don't remember any of that anymore.
**Wilson:** The faculty recognized that the intellectual life of the place can't go on oblivious to all the other compartments of life that have an impact on it. So I think we are far more seriously involved in these matters than is true most places.
**Warren:** You have had a really remarkable time at that university, and I'm very touched to hear you still very much use the first person plural. You may physically be removed from it, but emotionally you're obviously still very much there.
**Wilson:** Well, that's true. In spite of some of the difficulties, it really was the happiest twelve and a half years of my career. Anne became very fond of the students at Washington and Lee, and she knew more of them than I did, she really did. We weren't great entertainers. We had our special occasions and our special events and our friends, but she knew especially what I felt what also played to my own interest, but I was going to say I watched them perform on the athletic field or on the courts and I watched them in music and the theater and I watched the student government leadership develop and play the hand occasionally. But I've never been to a student's party except for an hour in fancy dress every year, and I could have done more, I'm quite sure, to come to know the students better.

I just got a copy of the class of 1994 Annual Fund Committee letter, a newsletter of some sort. It was wonderful. I looked down on the list of people. Sylvia has just had a baby and so on. There were so many I didn't know and I'm really sorry. Some I did, of course, know pretty well. So I've always regretted not coming to know the students better, but you can't do everything. Finally you have to say, "Well, I'll give my time and attention to this." I did enjoy watching them play and watching them perform. It is a lovely place. I think it is a remarkable place.

I was talking with some VPI people the other day at a luncheon. No, I'm sorry, some Hollins people the other night. I met with the chairman of the board and a couple of trustees at Hollins. This is the day Maggie announced her decision to go to St. Mary's. They said, "What do you think about this? Do you still love Hollins?"

[Whispering] I never loved Hollins. I was on the board and I served Hollins faithfully for a while as a trustee and chaired the search committee for the presidency and

some other things, not for Maggie, but for an earlier president, Paula Brownlee. I resigned from the board when I accepted the Washington and Lee position, because I knew there would be conflicts of interest in fund-raising and other events.

But anyway, I said, "You know, there's no faculty I've ever worked with, at Wells or at Hollins (I didn't work directly with them, but as a trustee), even at VPI, I've never met a faculty as civil as this faculty. They don't need to score points off each other. They're not trying to show off in faculty meetings by showing how clever and witty they are, and never at the expensive of somebody else. If they disagree with a position, they will say it with the utmost respect, or they'll keep quiet if they don't know how to do it and maybe take it up in another way in another form."

I said, "It's very unusual." I said, "Hollins faculty, frankly, though I'd never sat with them in a faculty meeting as president or anything like that, but I did have intercourse with them as a member of the board and on a committee on conferences I used to talk to faculty directly and so on, and I think they're spoiled. They're quite good, I'm sure, in their fields and everything, but I think they decided that maybe they're better than the place they're now serving. There's nothing worse than that."

He said, "Well, through the grace of God I [unclear]."

So that made life at Washington and Lee very special, to have a faculty so supportive.

Another thing I found out was the Hollins faculty are up in arms about reorientation of a building on the front of the campus in the gateway. I said, "You know, that never came up at Washington and Lee. I had my sector of responsibility, not officially demarcated, but clearly understood that I could build a little building out at the B&G complex up on the hill there for fifty thousand dollars a metal building, and nobody said, 'Why are you spending the university's money to build a B&G building?' or 'Why did you build that pavilion?' or 'Why are you building a two million dollar tennis court?'"

There was a trust there. "We look after our part. You don't come in and tell us how to teach Biology 101 and we'll let you spend too much money in renovating the locker room over at the stadium or whatever."

Nobody ever said, "Let's have a committee on the budget." Oh, my God, that would be terrible. To try to educate a constantly changing committee of faculty on the intricacies of the budget, one; two, [it would] take the fun away from the job. It's the only fun we have, honestly, is being able to see something accomplished, which usually means trying to allocate some resources. The real development of the arts, beyond the Lenfest Center, comes in the budget, how much more money we now spend to bring visiting groups in than we used to spend. Of course, just to sustain more faculty or adjunct

teachers of instruments over there [unclear]. To get the program out on that little celebration for Anne and for me last May, they say, "Here's what we were. Here's what we are now." That, frankly, is the fun of it, to see something grow and develop. If I had to work that through a committee—I mean, committees are good places to obfuscate where responsibility lies. I recognize the importance of them.

**Warren:** There are a lot of committees at Washington and Lee.

**Wilson:** Yeah, but they're not impediments to major forward movements from time to time, thank God. I had that kind of liberty. Well, I took it. I think I had it. I never was questioned about that. You know, Mr. Duchossois called or had his person call and say, "John, I want to give a million dollars to the campaign, but I want it to be in honor of you and Anne, and you are to select whatever you want to do with it." I felt like a millionaire for a week. I called Barbara Brown and I said, "Barbara, how much are you spending on English history and literature acquisitions a year? Would a million dollars endow that, fifty thousand, say, income?"

She gave me some numbers, and then I said, "Well, Oxford Cambridge Press, what do they cost a year?" They're so damned expensive.

Then I thought about some other things that we needed to have done, the Computer Center endowment, things for the campaign. I thought, "No. What I really would like and what Anne would really like is an indoor tennis court." I'll never forget our 1988 national championship team having to play the finals up in Staunton in an indoor three-court setup, because it was raining, that had, of course, private bookings. Washington and Lee had to go in and say, "We want to buy up the time of all of these folks who ordinarily play on Thursday and Friday afternoons."

And a foursome, ladies, said, "We don't choose to give that up. We are going to play. We always play at three o'clock on Thursday."

So here the national championship, Division 3 National Championship, being played out with two matches going full ball on one and three, and the ladies on two were patting the ball back and forth for an hour and a half. And there was a spectator prospect of a tiny little lobby with one window that looked at onto the number-two court. You could see just barely peripherally in. I mean, I went home. I didn't stay. It wasn't possible to watch it.

[Begin Tape 2, Side 2]

**Warren:** Last question. I have not seen it, but Frank says that for a while there, there was a very intermittent publication called The Spectator, and that you had a relationship with it that was not always compatible.

**Wilson:** Yes. The Spectator magazine came into being in the last half of the eighties sometime, '86 or '87. It was subsidized by national conservative groups. William Buckley is on the board, for example, of this one group, and Kenneth—I can't think of Kenneth's last name. He's the class of 1971, is the director of this foundation.

They took it upon themselves to be alarmed at the political correctness movement in America and selected out several institutions from the Dartmouth Review. I mean, several institutions, say Dartmouth, on the East Coast chiefly, to stem the tide of this left-wing subversive political correctness movement. It was anathema of, you can imagine, the black studies, women studies, African-American cultural centers, feminist studies, lesbian and gay things, of course, [unclear].

I'm not dismissing political correctness as an ephemeral thing. I think it has become absurd in certain places. It needs an attitudinal formulation. But I have never been, frankly, able to take it as seriously as the rest of the country seems to take it.

The Spectator had a—so they were subsidized by that group, and, frankly, they did editorial leads from that group. So the subject of the week might be affirmative action, and what I'm guessing is that the editors then had the task of taking the conservative line on affirmative action and using local examples to try to flesh out a story that looks to be particularly local rather than national. That's just a guess.

Because they were so hard pressed at Washington and Lee, a curricularly very conservative place. The faculty aren't as conservative as the curriculum is. But there aren't any women studies majors at Washington and Lee. We used to be said to be retrograde in respect to some of these things. The very fact that there was a person in the dean of students' office in the person of Anece McCloud who was responsible for minority student affairs and tried to help minority students fit into the Washington and Lee community with somewhat greater ease than otherwise would be the case, that was anathema to these groups. [unclear] was a special target, and still is, I think.

They got into a big donnybrook with our historian, young assistant professor, who was a very good teacher. She left. She got pilloried, and so did I, on the cover of this magazine. It was a mean-spirited thing. It was a cover with a picture of a secretary with her face interposed, so they were making her a clerical person by subtle—not too subtle—pictographic manipulation. But she opened herself up to their full-bore attention when she went to two or three of the advertisers in The Spectator magazine and said, "Do you realize what kind of magazine you're supporting?" You know, she knew these people in the community—Buster Lewis at the floral shop and so on. Of course, the next time The Spectator guy came down to place an ad, they said, "You know, your faculty aren't very enthused about this. I'm not sure we ought to continue our ad."

"What! She's trying to exercise prior constraint, a First Amendment sin of the worst sort." You know, they elevated this.

Anyway, I had differences of view with them, but I never took it seriously. I mean, I honestly didn't. Neither did many people in the community. They sent it out to alums, and they would always have an issue at homecoming weekend, which would be "Here's the place going to hell in a handbasket" kind of issue. And they didn't like me very much, the early editors. They didn't know me very well. They are capable in a few instances of manipulating stories and telling a distorted story or, I thought in a couple of cases, downright dishonest.

I called the editor in once to visit with him. He became a pretty good friend, actually. Well, not a friend. Cameron [unclear] was different. But anyway, we had a little playful exchange, but the faculty didn't take it seriously. Most of the students didn't, actually. It was a foreign [unclear], really.

I wish I could think of this scholastic something foundation that—Ken Cribbs. Now it's coming back. Ken Cribbs is this alumnus' name who's executive director or president or whatever of this foundation.

**Warren:** That's very interesting that it's outside money coming in.

**Wilson:** Oh, yes. Of course, they don't say it quite that way. They simply say, "We are not dependent on the university for any funding, or student government."

**Warren:** Was this openly known by everyone that the money was coming from this source?

**Wilson:** Not really. You can't—I mean, I didn't see their books, but I know that's true. How much of their money, whether they got some from parents, you know, students are writing home to parents all the time to support this and that, the Mock Convention to The Spectator.

A lot of people applauded this. This magazine was holding up tradition. Of course, they were very anti the coed thing. They came in a little late for that, but they had the retrospective view that it's probably a bad idea. But nobody paid attention to that. By that time, it was self-evident it was right for the university.

It's really kind of funny. I never took them very seriously. I honestly didn't. I did not wake up at night worrying about The Spectator, but some of my faculty colleagues did, especially the women. They felt it was especially inimical to issues important to women, as well as undergraduate women and women faculty. Well, that's enough said about that.

**Warren:** You've been extremely generous and patient with me. Do you have any final thing you want to say to wrap this up?

**Wilson:** No, really not.
**Warren:** One thing I want to tell you is that Lydia Miller from the development office is in the same building where Frank and I are. I told her I was coming to see you, and she said, "Oh, oh, President Wilson. We still have some of his letters. We just keep them because they're so beautifully written."
**Wilson:** That's nice.
**Warren:** She said, "He could say so much in so little, and he was just a model for us all." I thought that, as somewhat of a writer myself, I really admire someone who can say a lot in a little.
**Wilson:** They think I'm down here writing a great American novel, you know. I told people I was going to write a novel. I've never written a word of fiction, except as The Spectator would interpret it. [Laughter]
**Warren:** Well, I find fiction very intimidating. Just the thought of it is very intimidating.
**Wilson:** Yeah. I wouldn't even know whether I'd do it first person or third at this point. But I've got my Irish things up there, you know, and I enjoy being down here thinking about things like that.
**Warren:** I have one—you can say it in a phrase—last question. What year were you in a championship football team? Frank wants to work that in.
**Wilson:** In 1952.
**Warren:** Frank will give me gold stars now because I got that question answered. Thank you very much.
[End of Interview]_