

Conversations with Theodore C. (“Ted”) DeLaney, Jr.

and

Marc Conner, Molly C. Michelmore,
Barton Myers, David S. Peterson

August 13 – October 2, 2018

Mason Taylor New Room

Washington and Lee University

Introduction to the Series,
DeLaney Preface

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Abbreviations

Conv. = Conversation

Intro. = Introduction

Pref. = Preface



Left to right, David Peterson, Barton Myers, Ted DeLaney, Marc Conner, Tom Camden, and Molly Micheltmore, on the occasion of turning over the "Conversations" to Leyburn Library's Department of Special Collections, December 11, 2019. Photo courtesy of Kevin Remington, University Photographer.

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Introduction to the Series

David S. Peterson

Ted DeLaney was one of the best-known citizens of Lexington and among the most revered members of the Washington and Lee community. Anyone who ever strolled with him down Main Street or along the Colonnade knows that this could be a slow process. Ted knew practically everybody he met, stopped to greet them, and made conversation. In doing so he revealed considerable knowledge and concern for their affairs. He was a mine of our civic and institutional memory. Given the remarkable trajectory of his life, from growing up poor and black in segregated Lexington to becoming a full professor at Washington and Lee University, Chair of the History Department and the recipient of numerous honors and awards, his life reflects much of Lexington's, Washington and Lee's, and, indeed, of our nation's history. As one of W&L's first African-American professors, his perspective on these histories is unique.

Ted often talked of planning to write his memoirs in retirement. But in the summer of 2018 he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and appeared to be declining rapidly. It looked as though we were going to lose him. It was then that I hit upon the idea of recording a series of conversations with him as a way of "downloading" the pneumatic archive of his memory, and of giving him an opportunity to sum up some of the research he had done, notably on desegregation in south-western Virginia, that had not yet been published. I came up with a broad outline of eight topics and sketched them to Ted one morning over brunch. He thought they sounded pretty good. With the support of the university administration and staff from W&L's IT department we were able to video record a series of eight "conversations" in the stately Mason Taylor New Room in Payne Hall. Ted's an easy interview. He's a sharp observer and a natural raconteur: it's enough to pitch him a topic and he'll deliver a mini lecture. It is worth remembering, however, that the eloquent interviewee of our conversations was a man calmly facing down impending death. Happily, he won that round.

The outlines of Ted's remarkable life are familiar to many. Born in 1943, the eldest son of his mother's five children, Ted grew up in the Diamond Hill neighborhood of the segregated Lexington of the waning Jim Crow era. When it came time for college he declined a scholarship from the United Negro College Fund that would have enabled him to attend Morehouse College in order to assuage his mother's fear that he might fall in with the "freedom riders," African-American students who at great risk to themselves were then demanding civil rights and challenging the old order throughout the South. Instead, after taking several odd jobs as a gardener, a waiter and the like, and a brief stint as a postulant at a Catholic monastery of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement in upstate New York, Ted took a job as a janitor at W&L. He was soon promoted to lab technician in the Biology Department and served there for nineteen years (1963-83). Through his involvement in local activism and community affairs he met his wife Pat in 1968; they were married in 1973 and their son Damien was born in 1977.

With Pat's encouragement, in 1975 Ted enrolled in an evening U.S. history survey course taught by Professor John Barrett at VMI. In 1979 he began enrolling in a course a term at W&L (a staff perk!). With the encouragement of Dean Bill Watt and Pat's financial support, Ted enrolled full time at W&L in 1983 and graduated *cum laude* in History in 1985. He taught History for three years at The Ashville School in North Carolina. Then, at the prompting of Professor J. Holt Merchant (History), he enrolled in the doctoral program at The College of William and Mary, where he studied southern U.S. history with the distinguished historian Eugene Genovese. From 1991 to 1993 he held an ABD Fellowship at W&L and worked on his dissertation. From 1993 to 1995 he taught as an Instructor in History at The State University of New York-Geneseo before being hired back to W&L as an assistant professor in 1995 at the instigation of Department Head Bob McAhren.

Thereafter Ted was prolific.¹ Teaching was always his top priority. When he was not developing new courses or advising students, he was often preparing lectures (many based on original scholarly research) for alumni colleges, class reunions, guest presentations in colleagues' classes or in response to invitations to speak or be interviewed from local schools or neighboring colleges, museums and historical societies, even from institutions as far away as

¹ See his resume in the Appendix. His papers are conserved in Leyburn Library's Special Collections, WLU-Coll-0525.

Konyang University in South Korea or from public-facing media such as NPR and PBS. Service came a close second in importance. In 2005 Ted co-founded with Professors Marc Conner (English) and Pamela Simpson (Art History) the African-American Studies Program (and minor) which he directed until 2007 and which a few years later was expanded into the global Africana Studies Program which he likewise directed from 2013 to 2017. In between, he chaired the History Department (2007-13). Meanwhile, he served on well over a dozen university committees, most recently the President's Commission on Washington and Lee Institutional History and Community – for which he also developed a course on the institutional history of W&L that introduced students to archival research in Leyburn Library's Department of Special Collections. Ted likewise held important executive and advisory positions in the Southern Historical Association, the St. George Tucker Society, the Woodrow Wilson Presidential Library and on the Board of Directors of the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities. At the same time he published on topics as diverse as first lady Julia Gardner Tyler (his dissertation topic),² African-American railroad workers,³ sit-in demonstrations,⁴ and he even co-edited a volume on Wilsonian foreign policy.⁵

In recognition of these contributions Ted was inducted into Omicron Delta Kappa (2001), Phi Beta Kappa (2013), awarded the Harry F. and Mary Jane W. Redenbaugh Term Professorate for Excellence in Teaching (2009-12), invited to deliver the 2018 Fall Convocation address, awarded an honorary doctorate in Humane Letters from St. Paul's College, (2005), a Doctor of Letters degree from W&L (2019), the NAACP's Lexington/Rockbridge chapter's Community Service Award (2018). On his retirement, a lecture series in Africana Studies and a "Ted DeLaney '85 Scholarship" in the humanities and interdisciplinary studies were established in his honor. After teaching his last class on December 6, 2019 Ted stepped into the hall to find the entire College faculty waiting there to applaud him!

* * * * *

² "Julia Gardiner Tyler: A Nineteenth-Century Southern Woman" (Ph. D dissertation, The College of William and Mary, 1995); "American Royalty: The 'Reign' of First Lady Julia Gardiner Tyler," *The Journal of Western Civilization* (Korean Society of Western Civilization), n. 25, December 30, 2011.

³ "Pieces in a Larger Mosaic," forward to Sheree Scarborough, *African American Railroad Workers of Roanoke: Oral Histories of the Norfolk and Western* (Charleston and London: The History Press, 2014).

⁴ "The Sit-In Demonstrations in Historic Perspective." *North Carolina Historical Review* 87, 4 (2010).

⁵ With Joel Hodson, eds., *World of Power / World of Law: Wilsonianism and Other Visions of Foreign Policy*, special number of *White House Studies* 10 (4) (2010).

The topics of the eight conversations transcribed here are arranged in rough chronological order. In the first, on “Growing Up in Segregated Lexington,” Ted surveys the social and racial geography of Lexington, the “do’s and don’ts” of being a young black man, and the sense of community and optimism that prevailed among African-Americans and found their center in churches and schools such as Lylburn Downing and leadership among teachers, ministers and other black professionals.⁶ In a second conversation with Professor Molly C. Micheltmore of the W&L History Department Ted discusses “Lexington in the 1960s,” notably the impact of the Viet Nam War – and the draft – on W&L’s all male student body, and the application of the Supreme Court’s ruling on desegregation in *Brown v. Board of Education* to local schools, and some of the paradoxes of desegregation, as well as W&L’s muted decision to begin accepting black students.

Conversation Three on “The Education of Ted DeLaney” follows Ted’s intellectual and spiritual development through the decades in which, having decided to remain in Lexington and not to pursue a religious vocation as a friar, he settled into his position as a lab technician but also became involved in community affairs (PTA, Rockbridge County Board of Elections), started a family, then was persuaded to seek a college degree. His position as one of W&L’s few black students – and one with a family – offered him a remarkable vantage point for observing the social and academic culture of the privileged young men and faculty around him.⁷ Our fourth conversation, “From Student to Professor,” follows Ted through busy years he spent teaching at The Ashville School, his decision to pursue a doctorate at The College of William and Mary, the frustrations of teaching at a large and less affluent public university in upstate New York 1993-95), and Ted’s felicitous return to W&L, first as an ABD Fellow (1991-1993) and then in 1995 as an assistant professor with degree in hand.

In 2005, just four years after Ted reintroduced John Chavis, W&L’s and possibly the nation’s first black college student,⁸ to the Washington and Lee community in his 2001 ODK

⁶ See also Ted’s interview with Dr. Beverly Tucker of August 9, 2011, pub. in the Historic Lexington Foundation’s newsletter of Black History Month (February) 2016, summarized in Beverly Tucker, *The House on Fuller Street: African American Memories in Lexington VA* (Buena Vista, VA: Mariner Publishing, 2013), pp. 14-22.

⁷ See his interview with Mame Warren of July 31, 1996 in Leyburn Library’s Special Collections, Manuscript 0239, Warren, Mame; and his interview with Farei Chideya of July 9, 2007 on NPR (WVTF Roanoke), “News and Notes”: “From College Janitor to Professor”.

⁸ See Ted’s entry on Chavis in *American National Biography* (Oxford: OUP, 1999).

Founders Day address and two years after organizing an early conference on the half-centennial anniversary of *Brown v. Board*, Ted cofounded with Professors Conner and Simpson the African-American (later Africana) Studies Program. In the fifth conversation, “Building an Africana Studies Program” Ted and Marc discuss Ted’s first love, teaching. Trained originally at W&M in nineteenth century American History, particularly of the South, at W&L Ted developed a wide repertoire of courses on topics as varied as African-American History, the Civil Rights movement, “Natives and Strangers” (first encounters between Europeans and Indigenous Americans), the comparative history of slavery in the Americas, “Gay and Lesbian Life in the Twentieth Century U.S.” the Harlem Renaissance and many more. But the jewel in his crown may have been his traveling Spring term course “Freedom Ride,” a tour of the major sites of the civil rights movement, including here an account of an eerie visit to Money, Mississippi, where Emmett Till was lynched. Ted reports that he helped develop the program in response to student demand. But the demand was there because of his popularity among students as a teacher and advisor. There was nearly always a line of students outside his office waiting to see him.

Conversation Six focuses on Ted’s oral history project on desegregation in four counties in Southwestern Virginia (Rockbridge, Augusta, Botetourt, Roanoke) which was supported by a grant from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities. Here Ted explores not only the concern of companies relocating to the South to move forward with desegregation, but what to some readers may seem paradoxical, the nostalgia black Americans sometimes express, not for segregation itself, but for the sense of community solidarity that prevailed among African-Americans during that period. He also offers some valuable methodological and archival leads for future researchers in the field.

Our Civil War historian Barton Myers explores with Ted in Conversation Seven some of the complexities of “Washington and Lee and Southern History,” beginning with the confusion in some quarters as to whether it is Lee the educator or Lee the Confederate general who is venerated here. After reviewing the place of Lee in the narrative of the South’s “Lost Cause” and as the object of a kind of “civil religion,” Ted recounts some of his own harrowing experiences lecturing to regional lay historical societies and the reasons for which, at a certain point (c. 2007), he took on the role not simply of professor but of a public intellectual, deploying

his knowledge of history and museum studies to lead public resistance to a proposal to bring the Museum of the Confederacy from Richmond to Lexington.

In a final conversation Ted dilates more fully on some of the family members, teachers, clergy, friends and colleagues who have had the greatest influence in shaping his remarkable life. His maternal grandmother Margaret Jane Jones Franklin taught him to read and impressed on him the importance of education and self-reliance. Father Carl Rykowski challenged him to ask himself “what have you done for other people?” Father John Behen took bold stands on the political issues of his day. Ted’s wife Pat pressed him to go to college and helped put him through it. Professor Henry Roberts in the Biology Department promoted him from janitor to lab technician and likewise encouraged him to get a college degree. Gary Dobbs, despite his tragic end, taught Ted that it is possible to maintain close friendships even with those with whom one is in complete political disagreement. Bob McAhren proposed Ted’s invitation to return to W&L as an assistant professor and modeled concern for the personal welfare of his students. And Will Coffman was a paraplegic student who made the most of his opportunities without ever complaining about his difficulties.

Happily, Ted was able to hold the cancer at bay for over two years, allowing him among other things to dote on his grandchildren Stella and Wyatt⁹. But, sadly, it returned this Autumn. Ted’s deep religious faith strengthened him to face death with courage, realism, and grace. He passed away on Friday, December 18, 2020.

When we presented the videos of our “Conversations” to Special Collections in a ceremony on December 11, 2019, Ted offered some extemporaneous reflections. Afterwards, people felt that these too should be archived along with the “Conversations”. So Ted wrote them out from memory and they now serve as the Preface to this collection of the transcriptions.

December 11, 2019, updated December 30, 2020.

⁹ Stella M. McDonald DeLaney (2011-), Wyatt E. McDonald DeLaney (2013-).

Preface

Ted DeLaney

During Winter Term 2018, I informed the Dean of the College that I would retire in Spring 2019 and embark on writing an autobiography. Nearly two months after that communication with the dean, doctors informed me that I had metastatic pancreatic cancer. By mid-summer I had lost more than 50 pounds and believed my death would occur before summer's end. Writing an autobiography no longer seemed possible. Coincidentally, my colleague and friend David Peterson conceived the idea of a Ted DeLaney memoir through a series of one-hour long oral histories. This preface to those oral history interviews provides a few explanations and clarifications.

After using oral history interviews as a research tool to study school desegregation, no one is more familiar than me with the merits and flaws of oral history. Interviews surely add a rich and exciting dynamic to historical narratives. They enable people to enthusiastically recall events that were either joyful or painful. Conversely, they also afford people the opportunity to spin the story in ways that are favorable to their own viewpoints. More important, memories are often inaccurate and as a researcher, I had to rely on manuscript sources for greater accuracy. Additionally, I have chosen not to edit the interviews. Therefore, readers should understand that transcriptions of the spoken word are not always grammatically correct and without repetition of words and phrases. Student researchers, who use these interviews, should also be aware of possible bias or flaws in my memory and should place them in larger historical context by consulting official records of the university and newspapers.

My memory is unique, not because it is better than those of other people. It is unique because few people have been fortunate enough to have such a positive and long-term association with a single institution of higher learning like Washington and Lee University. My affiliation with W&L spans some 56 years and had an unlikely beginning because it started during the latter part of the Jim Crow Era when W&L was all-male and all-white. Not only was race a factor, class was also a major barrier. As a poor, black man, I came to work at W&L after failing to escape Lexington and the trap that ensnared nearly every other local black man: menial labor at Virginia Military Institute or W&L. My menial labor job turned into an opportunity—an opportunity to become a well-educated professional man. W&L has been good to me, and for that I will be eternally grateful.

Yet, in spite of my incredible experiences at W&L, I became a full-time student nearly twenty years after the university announced its desegregation of the student body in 1964. Prior to my 1983 matriculation, I earned 38 college credits while working fulltime. Enrollment in these classes began in 1979, and I took only one class per term. Classes were not free but an employment perk. As a full-time student, I paid at least fifty percent of my tuition through state loans; the other half was through a scholarship. Like most other students, I was not on a “free ride.” My tuition was not a gift from W&L, nor should it have been.

Establishing that tuition was not a gift is important because I need researchers and other readers to understand that I am not uncritical of Washington and Lee and often describe my affiliation with it as a love-hate relationship. W&L, like every other human institution, is not without flaws. Not only did W&L resist desegregation as long as possible, moving forward to become a university that is fully inclusive of African Americans and other minority groups has been largely unsuccessful. From my perspective the reasons are: 1) a continuing attempt to appease southern white alumni and students’ love with the Confederate past and Lost Cause narrative; 2) failure to actively fund affirmative recruitment of students and faculty members; 3) failure to create a campus climate that is more welcoming to students of diverse backgrounds; and 4) W&L’s affinity for attracting students who aim to attend an institution that has little or no diversity. During my roughly twenty-five years on the faculty, there has been more talk than action regarding recruitment of more students and faculty members of color.

Being a black faculty member at W&L is not easy. The likelihood of developing support networks or friendships with other people of color is a tremendous problem. Even the most liberal of white colleagues fail to understand why Robert E. Lee is such a problem for black faculty members and students. Careful reading of Washington College President Lee's 1866 testimony before the Congressional Committee on Reconstruction of the 39th Congress reveals Robert E. Lee's views about race in the most unvarnished way. Aside from denouncing black suffrage, Lee stereotypes blacks by noting that wherever blacks are found, things are going down rather than up, and he also wants blacks removed from the Commonwealth of Virginia. Until recently, I have not had the freedom to safely criticize Lee at Washington and Lee University. Yet for many years, colleagues expected me to be part of task forces and committees engaged in the perennial problem of increasing diversity on campus. Unfortunately, I am not optimistic about future success on this score. To that extent, I am profoundly disappointed.

December 11, 2019