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Westhampton College Celebrates 100 Years

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Nearly 100 years ago, Westhampton College started as an institution with one building, a handful of students and a determined leader. Now, as the University of Richmond’s women’s college approaches its centennial anniversary, it serves almost 1,700 undergraduate women as part of the university’s coordinate college system.

“Anniversaries are a convenient way to do what historians do all the time, which is stop and reflect how did we get here and where are we going,” Pres. Ed Ayers said of the centennial. And Westhampton College has come a long way.

By 1914, Richmond College had existed as a small Baptist college near downtown Richmond, Va., for more than 80 years. In that time, higher education for women in America had gone from non-existent to increasingly common, and Richmond College had already been awarding bachelor’s degrees to women for more than a decade. But those few students had to commute to school each day, as there were still no facilities for women.

With the permission of the Virginia Baptist Association, Richmond College set in motion plans to create a companion women’s college, with separate staff, classes and facilities.

“The school we propose to establish will be no experiment,” Pres. Frederic Boatwright wrote in 1907, “Nor will it be co-educational, as some seem to fear. […] In our college a woman can take her degree of Bachelor of Arts or Science without ever sitting in a class with men.”

Richmond College found space to expand at an abandoned fairground near Little Westham Creek, and finished construction of its new campus in 1914. Westhampton College had its home in what’s now called North Court. Eighty-two women enrolled in Westhampton College that first year, but less than half lived on campus.

While Westhampton College may have started with low enrollment, it had a passionate leader in Dean May Lansfield Keller, the first female college dean in Virginia. Keller spent 32 years guiding Westhampton College through two world wars and shaping it into a modern and adept institution.

Though Richmond and Westhampton colleges merged their academic operations in 1990, they remain as “residential colleges,” and still maintain separate student government associations.

Preparations are already underway for next year’s commemorations, said Kerry Fankhauser, associate dean and chairwoman of the centennial committee. While things have not been formalized, she said, the committee is considering an event centered on the annual Proclamation Night ceremony.

All Westhampton College alumnae would be invited back to campus, Fankhauser said, and graduates from each decade may be selected to speak about their time as a student. The alumnae would be able to watch the 2014 Proclamation Night from a tent outside Cannon Memorial Chapel, and then the freshman and senior women would process by their predecessors. Alumnae and visitors could then take tours of North Court to see how it’s changed.

That night, the Westhampton College Government Association would hold a leadership dinner, and past members would be invited to give advice to the current student leaders.

Other commemorations could include a photo exhibit in the Modlin Center for the Arts, a women’s leadership guest speaker and centennial patches for the university police and women’s sports teams.

I love the thought that we are fulfilling what Dr. Boatwright imagined 100 years ago, by offering a progressive education that brings men and women together and prepares them for the world,” Ayers said.

- BEN PANKO