

Philanthropy in Virginia: The Founding of William & Mary

Unlike the New England settlements, Virginia was a royal colony with a governor appointed by the Crown. The Anglican Church was the established (tax-supported) denomination. These factors, together with Virginia's close commercial ties with England, assured that the colony's charitable institutions would be framed by English practices and precedents.

The chartering of the College of William & Mary, the colonies' second institution of higher learning, in 1689, provides an excellent example of how southerners in the seventeenth century proceeded in pursuing the common good. Although the initial impetus for founding the college was voluntary, the rest of the process was thoroughly political, involving not only the participation and encouragement of the Virginia Assembly, but also the Crown and the Church of England.

The College's foundation contained both modern and traditional elements. The voluntary subscription of funds by the colonists, by the Governor, and by the merchants of London was something relatively new. The grant of money and land by the Crown and the assignment of particular tax revenues -- a penny a pound on exported tobacco and the duty on skins and furs -- were essentially feudal practices. Note the fact that the College was at no point considered to be a private entity: every aspect of its operations, from curriculum through administration and fundraising, were closely supervised by government.

Finally, it is worth noting Beverly's comment on the reluctance of those who had pledged to support the College to make good on their pledges. This kind of default would become an all too common theme in the founding of early American colleges. So

too would be the rivalry between Virginia towns, several of which sought to be the site of the new institutions. As one critic would write in 1704,

others (but without any reason) are angry at the place where the college is situated, which yet is absolutely the best of the whole country; but it fares with the college in this point as with towns -- everyone would have one in his own county and neighborhood, and yet the college can be in only one place; and if it had been in another place, other would have had as much to say against that.

Robert Beverly: account of the founding of the college, from "The History and Present State of Virginia"

During that gentleman's presidency, which began *Anno* 1689, the project of a college was first agreed upon. The contrivers drew up their scheme and presented it to the president and council. This was approved, and referred to the next assembly. . . .

Anno 1690. Francis Nicholson, Esq., being appointed lieutenant-governor under the Lord Effingham, arrived there. This gentleman's business was to fix himself in my lord's place, and recommend himself to the supreme government. For that end, he studied popularity, discoursing freely of country improvements. He made his court to the people by instituting Olympic games, and giving prizes to all those that should excel in the exercises of riding, running, shooting, wrestling, and backword. When the design of a college was communicated to him, he foresaw what interest it might create him with the bishops in England, and therefore promised it all imaginable encouragement. The first thing desired of him was the calling of an assembly; but this he would by no means agree to, being under obligations to the Lord Effingham, to stave off assemblies as long as he could, for fear there might be further representations over against his lordship, who was conscious to himself how uneasy the country had been under his despotic administration.

When that could not be obtained, then they proposed that a subscription might pass through the colony to try the humor of the people in general, and see what voluntary contributions they could get towards it. This he granted, and he himself, together with the Council, set a generous example to the other gentlemen of the country, so that the subscriptions at last amounted to about two thousand five hundred pounds, in which sum is included the generous benevolence of the merchants of London.

Anno 1691, an assembly being called, this design was moved to them, and they espoused it heartily; and soon after made an address to King William and Queen Mary in its behalf, and

send the Reverend Mr. James Blair their agent to England, to solicit their Majesties' charter for it. . . .

The Assembly was so fond of Governor Nicholson at that time that they presented him with the sum of three hundred pounds as a testimony of their good disposition towards him. But he having an instruction to receive no present from the country, they drew up an address to their Majesties, praying that he might have leave to accept it.

This he took an effectual way to secure by making a promise that if their Majesties would please to permit him to accept it, he would give one half to the college; and so he secured at once both the money and the character of being a generous person.

Their Majesties were well pleased with that pious design. . . , and granted a charter, according to their desire; in obtaining which the address and assiduity of Mr. Blair, their agent, was highly to be admired.

Their Majesties were graciously pleased to give near two thousand pounds sterling, the balance upon the account of quit-rents, toward the founding [of] the college; and towards the endowing of it, they allowed twenty thousand acres of choice land, together with the revenue arising by the penny per pound, on tobacco exported from Virginia and Maryland to the other plantations.

It was a great satisfaction to the archbishops and bishops to see such a nursery of religion founded in that new world; especially for that it was begun in an Episcopal way, and carried on wholly by zealous conformists to the Church of England. . . .

When Sir Edmund Andros [in 1692] was sent over the college charter and the subsequent Assembly declared that the subscriptions which had been made to the college were due and

immediately demandable. They likewise gave a duty on the exportation of skins and furs, for its more plentiful endowment.

The subscription monies did not come in with the same readiness with which it had been underwritten. However, there was enough given by their Majesties and gathered from the people to keep all hands at work and carry on the building, the foundation whereof they then laid.

Source: Robert Beverly, The History and Present State of Virginia, Louis B. Wright, ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1947), 97-100, 101-102.

Additional Readings:

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