

The Old Blue Hotel and The Consequential Battle Over Its Fate

This item complements Anecdote No. 7 about efforts to save the Nannie Jordan House from demolition.

PROLOGUE



WASHINGTON AND LEE University's impact on the Lexington and Rockbridge area is outsize, to say the least. This is true architecturally as well as economically, and for all the visual splendor of the campus – a National Historic Landmark – its role in preserving the community's heritage in the mid-20th century was mixed.

Today, W&L sets a standard that in our best moments we've met. Would anyone even think of building something here made of stainless steel and mirrored glass? W&L has struck deals with private real-estate developers to lease historic downtown buildings, and W&L has made them look better than they did before. (Think of the Hopkins House on West Nelson Street and the Old Courthouse.) And in these deals W&L has made sure the buildings stay on the tax rolls even though they're used for tax-exempt purposes. Battles regularly

flare up, as with the railroad workers' homes in the McLaughlin Triangle and the low-rise profile on the northmost block of Lee Avenue, where W&L hopes to expand, but for the most part W&L is a decent neighbor.

But not too many decades ago, the story was different. Washington and Lee says that in those days it was strapped for money and couldn't invest in preserving community buildings, and no doubt that's so. (When he took office as W&L president in 1968, Robert E. R. Huntley said the college was "broke.")

In 1940 Washington and Lee, then owner of the Nannie Jordan House on North Main Street, demolished the historic old residence, built



The Jordan House in the 1930s, shortly before it was demolished

about the time Lexington was formed in 1778.



The uproar over that act was the main impetus in the formation of the Rockbridge Historical Society.



NINE YEARS LATER, the university, apparently unchastened and no richer, found itself holding the deed to another historic building in dire need of rehabilitation, the so-called Old Blue Hotel, at the junction of Jefferson and Washington Streets. W&L had bought it in 1871 and used it since then mainly as a dormitory. After World War II, as veterans and new students flooded the university, student housing was at a premium – but even so, W&L said it lacked the resources to make Old Blue habitable again and instead it placed three students into on-campus dorm rooms meant for two. And tore down Old Blue.

That act strengthened the preservation movement. Anger over Old Blue's fate seethed for the next twenty years, and in 1966 when yet another historic house came under threat – this one unconnected to Washington and Lee – the preservationists were

prepared. Having lost twice, they quickly formed a new organization, Historic Lexington Foundation, to put an end for all time to the casual demolition of area historic structures.

Today the two organizations, the Rockbridge



Historical Society and Historic Lexington Foundation, continue to press their preservationists' agenda. There is wide agreement that, skirmishes aside,

the preservationists have mostly tuned the tide.

In the 1940s, the imminent threat to Old

Blue attracted attention from the *Rockbridge County News*. And on the eve of the trustees' vote, a well-researched article appeared on the front page of a W&L student newspaper called *The Columns*. Here are the full *Columns* article and excerpts from the *County News* coverage.

OLD BLUE FATE TO BE DECIDED IN COMING WEEK

One-Time Tavern, Hotel Served as Athletes Dorm; May Help Avert Shortage

[*The Columns*, July 5, 1946]

By Bob Baker

"The Washington and Lee University has purchased the Lower Hotel property for \$9,000. The building is of brick and very commodious. It adjoins the College campus and is very convenient. The price is considered fair both for seller and buyer."

The above news item announcing the sale of what is now called the Old Blue, located at Jefferson and Main on the campus, appeared in the March 31, 1871 issue of the *Lexington Gazette*. That transaction climaxed the colorful career of one of Rockbridge County's best and most famous taverns.

The Old Blue was built in three sections. The first section was completed before 1800 by Matthew Hanna, one of Lexington's foremost early citizens, and the last section was added in 1877. These three sections can easily be seen in the outside walls.

Once a Tavern

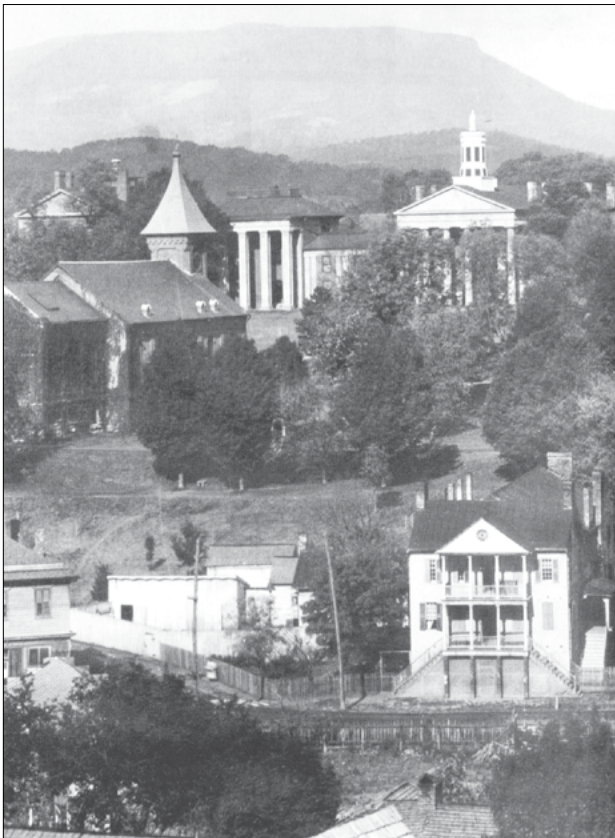
Because this section of the Valley Pike had always been a convenient

"A part of the Blue Hotel was standing in 1819 when Jacob Clyce bought this half acre of land at auction on February 12 for \$1050.00. The lower end of Jefferson street had not then been opened and on the southwest side of the tavern building Clyce erected extensive stables and outbuildings. Between 1819 and 1827 he also added twice to the tavern itself, additions that were visible in the brick walls from the outside of the building. It was probably during this time that Clyce built the lovely front of the building with its double porches supported by slender Ionian pillars and its lunette in the attic above. This portion of the building, was the English basement type with parlors on the second floor, and in these parlors were handsome, hand-carved mantels. The older rear portions of the building were plain."

— *County News*, September 4, 1947

stopping place, the Exchange Hotel, as it was known then, served as a hostelry to many famous and near-famous people. Andrew Jackson is said to have stopped there often on his way to and from Washington. Many notables discussed the news and needs of the times over a cup of home brewed beer or French brandy — at 25c per quart. A cold dinner, famous throughout the south, cost 20c and a room with a comfortable

Blue Hotel, lower right, shortly after 1883, looking west across the Washington and Lee University campus



MICHAEL WILEY COLLECTION, WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

"Its removal would be like a gaping tooth. A landmark has sentimental value as well as architectural. Such landmarks are an asset anywhere, especially in Lexington whose only asset is 'atmosphere.'" — unidentified writer, *County News*, July 2, 1942

feather bed and clean sheets cost 12½ cents.¹

The tavern was well known for its spacious accommodations and conveniences. Large stables, slave quarters, smoke and storage houses surrounded the inn. The front facade of two stories of Ionic columns, the lunette attic windows, and the hand-carved interior mantels occasioned the structure to be called the most handsome building at that time in this area.

In 1838–40, the cadets of Virginia's new Virginia Military Institute were quartered at the hotel until their barracks were ready and it was in the late 1840's that the Exchange Hotel reached its heyday. The elite of Rockbridge County, leading gentlemen gathered there for a glass of cheer and a chat. And it was at this time that the tavern reached

1 Clyce's establishment was called the Western Inn before it became The Exchange. *County News*, July 2, 1942



Old Blue in the 1930s

its highest point of luxury. Although it was considered a country tavern, the Exchange far exceeded most metropolitan hotels in the stock on hand.

"A hundred years from now it might be a priceless feature of the college campus and be looked upon as one of the most valued possessions of a university whose greatest assets lie in its traditions."

— *County News*, July 30, 1942, echoing a hope raised in the W&L alumni magazine that the hotel could be turned into an alumni headquarters

Hundreds of bottles of French champagne barrels of French and domestic brandy, kegs of port and Madeira wine and thousands of "segars"² are but a few of the items that were kept stored, ready for use.

After the sale of the property to the University, the Old Blue, so called because it was at one time painted a blue-grey,³ became a home for students

during the school term and a boarding house during the summer months. Slowly the once-splendid building was neglected. In its last useful years it housed a handful of university athletes.

In 1942 the Old Blue was condemned. The original stout oak beams had finally rotted. Since then the elements have broken the windows, crashed the wooden railings and ripped off the paint. Today it is a weather-beaten eye-sore, more so than the many gas stations and hash houses that surround it on what was formerly the Old Blues terrace.

The fate of Old Blue is in the hands of the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees which will meet this week. Whether it will be restored to a semblance of its former splendor and serve as a student apartment or whether it will be neglected at perhaps razed will be decided at that time.

To no avail. On September 4, 1947, the *County News* reported with sadness: "The 'Old Blue' hotel is coming down. The wrecker's bars . . . are tearing apart the brick and mortar and beams this week."



Town map, 1877. North is at the top. The Blue Hotel is at the intersection of Main and Jefferson Streets.

2 As they were listed in the 1853 estate inventory of Clyce's son James.

3 The same "gentle blue-gray that was formerly used on the manse and other brick houses of that period, a color as becoming to its lines and setting as lavender and old lace to a lady." — unidentified writer, *County News*, July 2, 1942