THE LEE CHAPEL CONTROVERSY

President Henry Louis Smith, President of Washington and Lee University, Clearly Defines His Position.

In our last issue we made editorial comment on the regrettable stand taken by a well-meaning group of General Lee's admirers, who, through a misconception of the plans for reconstructing the Lee Chapel at Lexington, are now making a fight to frustrate its enlargement.

Feeling that such a stand is without any stable foundation, in face of the true intent of the trustees of Washington and Lee University, and that General Lee himself would not be in sympathy with ousting the student body from their place of assembly to make a dumb shrine—hero worship he detested—the editor has requested President Smith to state the trustees' position, which we carry below. Before doing so, however, a short résumé of the chapel's history by President Smith is appropriate to his latest statement:

The Present Building

The present university chapel was built during General Lee's presidency, in 1867. A former professor of history states that his son, Custis, afterward professor and president, supervised its construction and probably drew the plans. It was a composite building, the administrative offices occupying the first floor, the college chapel the second.

On the day of General Lee's funeral, Oct. 15, 1870, a Lee Memorial Association was formed among his former officers, which engaged Valentine to carve a recumbent statue of the general, and began eight years later a mausoleum, 31 by 36 feet, in the rear of the chapel, to contain the Lee tomb on its first floor and the statue immediately above, behind the chapel rostrum.

After 12 years of loyal effort, unable to raise all the funds necessary, the Memorial Association in 1882 deeded the statue and partly built mausoleum to the University, which
completed the mausoleum and dedicated it with imposing ceremonies on June 28, 1883.

The little chapel was erected during a period when American architecture had reached its lowest ebb, and although those who have seen the building all their lives have, of course, learned to love and venerate it, almost all strangers, contrasting the lofty grandeur of the statue with the homeliness of the chapel front and its ludicrous tower, experience a sense of surprise and depression.

At the great Lee Centennial of 1908, as Chas. Francis Adams was leaving the chapel after his epoch-making defense of General Lee, he remarked to Dr. Latané, “The only reproach to General Lee’s memory is this building which he allowed to deface his campus.” Some years ago Miss Mary Lee, referring to the ugliness of its tower and front, said to the writer, “You know it was finished up by the carpenters according to the money they had, not as father wished it.”

The building contains no possible place for a modern organ, and the means of ingress and egress are so faulty that although its total seating capacity is small, it takes from 10 to 15 minutes to empty the building.

The Question at Issue

No one, however, dreamed of altering the chapel till the rapid increase of the student-body outgrew its seating capacity, and forced the faculty and trustees to answer this question: “Shall General Lee’s chapel be withdrawn from the life of the University and set aside as a mere monument, a pilgrim shrine for visitors, or shall it be enlarged and thus enabled to carry on among his students for all future time the work for which he constructed it?”

Those Who Have Decided It

Surely, if any body of men in America can be safely trusted by all General Lee’s countless adorers to think this question through and decide it rightly, it is the fifteen trustees who inherit his institution, represent his family, own
and control his tomb, are saturated with Lee traditions and
loyalties, are intimately acquainted with all the circum-
stances and with all possible arguments on both sides, are
spending their lives advancing his fame and propagating
his principles, and have reached their unanimous conclusion
after years of deliberation.

The Objection to Reconstruction

The first reaction of any Lee idolater, unacquainted with
the whole situation, is about as follows: "General Lee
planned and erected this building, worshiped daily in it, and
used one of its rooms as his personal office. It is thus in a
peculiar sense his personal monument, and for a half century
has been the South's most sacred shrine. It should be so
preserved untouched forever. To alter it is a profanation.
Granting that the university must have a larger auditorium,
let it build it elsewhere and preserve General Lee's own
chapel just as he himself left it when called to his reward."

A Misconception

If this were a true statement of the case, it would seem
incredible that General Lee's own grandson, with the other
trustees and the whole faculty of his institution, should
unanimously decide to reconstruct the chapel. These ob-
jectors are confusing General Lee's Chapel with General
Lee's Tomb.

It is General Lee's Tomb, where his body lies, surrounded
by those he loved, waiting the morning of the Resurrection,
that is "The South's most sacred shrine." It is the maus-
soleum, the crypt, the marvelous statute, all added since
General Lee's death, and his little office immediately at the
entrance to the tomb, that visitors come to see. From con-
stant contact with groups of tourists extending over ten
years one doubts if one visitor in fifty ever learns that Gen-
eral Lee built the little chapel through which he goes to
see the tomb. General Lee also built his nearby home,
lived in it, and died in it, yet not one visitor a week ever
turns aside to visit it. It is General Lee's Tomb, not the
chapel, which is and will ever be "The South's most sacred
Shrine."