Roster of men's colleges dwindles

LEXINGTON, Va. (UPI) — When Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee became president of Washington & Lee University, he insisted that all students be "gentlemen."

It wasn't until a couple of weeks ago that the 235-year-old school extended an invitation to ladies.

After nine months of soul-searching, the 23 men and one woman on the board of trustees voted 17-7 to admit female undergraduates in 1985.

The sixth-oldest institution of higher learning in the nation, W&L was one of only five remaining all-male liberal arts colleges, three of them in Virginia. By contrast, 110 U.S. liberal arts colleges remain exclusively female.

W&L's law school was opened to women in 1972, largely because the American Bar Association threatened to withdraw accreditation from schools that practiced sexual discrimination.

W&L had rejected undergraduate coeducation four times over the past two centuries.

Students rallied to protest the idea this time by taking over Wilson's office for a sit-in. They draped a statue of George Washington, who endowed the college, with signs that read, "No Marthas." Bumper stickers appeared that said, "Better Dead than Coed."

The catalyst for change was John Wilson, who took over as president in January 1983.

Wilson, previously provost at Virginia Tech, reasoned that a declining population of male high school graduates eventually would lead to a choice between lowering academic standards at W&L or going broke.

Wilson said W&L would not grow much beyond its present size and probably no more than one-third of the student body would be female by 1995.

That would allow the change to be made with a minimum of expense — a few hundred additional beds, a new locker room, and the switching of nameplates on some bathrooms.

The biggest challenge will be the eradication of institutionalized chauvinism. A committee of students and faculty will be appointed to smooth the way for the first class of coeds.

"They're going to be pioneers," said student president Cole Dawson.

Opponents, including a majority of the students and alumni, fear coeducation threatens the essence of W&L's masculine mystique.

The Lexington campus exudes the atmosphere of the Old South from white columns and manicured lawns. Students wear neckties to class by choice, and lacrosse is the major sport. There is one professor for every 11 undergraduates, and a strict honor system.

There was the unspoken assumption that coeducation might loosen the fraternities' stranglehold on campus social life. Sixty percent of the 1,350 undergraduates belong to fraternities — which import students from nearby women's schools for boisterous "mixers."

At Wilson's suggestion the trustees ordered a study of the pros and cons of coeducation last October.

The faculty sided with Wilson, endorsing coeducation 4-1 as a way to inject a fresh viewpoint into classrooms.

Female law students, who make up one-third of the graduate program, accused W&L men of having an immature view of women, fostered by an artificial social atmosphere.

"They just see cute young things in makeup and party dresses," Eileen McCabe said. "It gives them a warped perception."