W & L vote is for coeducation

All-male tradition broken by 235-year-old university

By MARY BISHOP
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LEXINGTON — In a move that had some people celebrating Saturday afternoon and some students grieving, Washington and Lee University’s Board of Trustees voted 17-7 to enroll undergraduate women beginning in the fall of 2015.

After nine months of study and emotional pleadings against coeducation by many students and alumni, the trustees decided “that the educational benefits of the university should be extended to men and women undergraduates alike, and as a result, the quality of the university will be improved,” they said in a statement read at a Saturday afternoon news conference.

President John D. Wilson, the first of the trustees to vote for coeducation in Saturday's roll-call balloting, said the university hopes to enroll as many as 100 women in 1995 and up to 250 by 1996.

He said the trustees plan to hold total undergraduate enrollment at between 1,200 and 1,500 in the first decade of coeducation, which will mean fewer male students than last year's figure of 1,360. The law school, which admitted women in 1972, last year had about 350 students, one-third of them women.

Saturday's historic news brought contrasting emotions from a crowd that gathered on campus to get the word. It was announced at a 12:50 p.m. news conference at W & L's Commerce School Building after the trustees had voted in a carefuliy guarded, closed-door meeting in the auditorium of the university library.

“Lexington has entered the 20th century — now we have both a McDonald’s and a coed university,” said a jubilant Peter Whitehead, 22, a June graduate who came from Roanoke to get the news firsthand. He had been one of the most vocal advocates of coeducation on campus.

There were cheers in Room 203 at W & L’s Reid Hall, where a group of staffers, faculty and former students watched the news conference on closed-circuit television. “It was pandemonium,” Whitehead said.

Some students, like Scott Tilley from Richmond, however, were depressed. “Washington and Lee as an institution will thrive and do well, but Washington and Lee as I know it is gone already,” he said sadly as he stood outside the Commerce School Building and talked of the special camaraderie between the men there.

“Ask of today,” he said with tears in his eyes, “it’s a new school.”

Nonetheless, vehement opponents among students and alumni said they would stand by the school and no students said they would leave because of coeducation.