LEXINGTON, Va. (AP) — Washington and Lee University, one of the three all-male private universities left in the country, decided Saturday it will admit women as full-time undergraduates, breaking a 235-year tradition that was overwhelmingly supported by students and alumni.

The Board of Trustees at the university founded by George Washington voted, 17 to 7, to begin coeducation in the fall of 1985. The school's governing board had turned down the same idea in 1969 and 1975. In making its decision, the Board considered the declining pool of high school students going to college as well as the opinions of students, alumni and staff, Board Chairman James M. Ballenger said. Polls said 80 per cent of the faculty supported coeducation, while students and alumni opposed it by a 2-to-1 margin.

'Better Dead Than Coed'

Students who opposed coeducation have carried out a sit-in at the president's office. Bumper stickers saying "Better Dead Than Coed" and "Girls in the Hay, Not All Day" appeared on cars, and a statue of George Washington was dressed in a banner saying, "No Marthas."

But the incoming student body president and the head of the alumni association said they support the change.

"The women will be pioneers starting off," said student body President Cole Dawson. "But I think they will find it rewarding."

"Washington and Lee is very much a unique institution," and coeducation won't change that, Charles Hurt, alumni association president, added.

University President John Wilson said he expects that as many as 100 women could be offered places at W and L in the first year of coeducation. W and L's combine over 4,700 students, including more than 300 in its law school.

"We're not going to expand the size of the university very much at all — no further than 150 more undergraduates than we have now," Wilson said.

Officials at the other two private male colleges, Hampden-Sydney in Virginia and Wabash College in Crawfordsville, Ind., say coeducation has not been a major issue on their campuses. Virginia and South Carolina both have publicly supported, all-male military schools.

The effects of coeducation on W and L's operation have yet to be spelled out, Wilson said.

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