



Office for Strategic Affairs
Council on Virginia Tech History
800 Driftfield Drive
Burruss Hall, Suite 113
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061
P: (540) 231-3703 F: (540) 231-3147
strategicaffairs@vt.edu

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To: Commemorative Tributes Committee

From: The Council on Virginia Tech History, submitted on behalf of the Council by Menah Pratt-Clarke, Vice President for Strategic Affairs and Diversity

Re: The residence hall currently named Lee

The Council on Virginia Tech History unanimously recommends immediately removing the name Claudius Lee from the residence hall currently bearing it.

The Council unanimously proposes the names of Janie and William Hoge for a replacement identity.

Background: Claudius Lee and Lee Hall

The matter of Lee Hall has come up to the level of presidential attention during three successive Virginia Tech administrations. Each previous episode, certainly the first, led sooner or later to some significant results, but both left much undone. Never did an administration take action in ways that the resulting reports deemed necessary — not optional — with regard to Lee Hall itself.

Lee Hall is named for Claudius Lee, who — born in 1872, the same year Tech was — proved to be a key figure on the electrical engineering faculty at Virginia Polytechnic Institute from the 1890s to the 1940s. He was deemed a worthy recipient of the honor, six years after his death at the age of ninety in 1962, of having a large new high-rise residence hall named after him in 1968.

For nearly 23 years, however, the continued appropriateness of having his name on that building has been strongly challenged. A source of chronic concern among various members of the campus community, including residents of the hall, it has emerged as a particularly big issue three different times. To date, the name remains.

White Terrorists, Black Targets

The matter came up in fall 1997 when students in a new History of Virginia Tech class came across a truly disturbing page (101, see Appendix A) in the 1896 student yearbook, *The Bugle*, which Lee, a graduating senior that year, edited himself, and in which he presented himself as president — “father of terror” — of a group that called itself the “K.K.K.” Students had been directed to go in teams to Special Collections and see what they could find in school yearbooks that struck them as having historical significance, then report to their classmates, and that particular page is what they found and reported on.

A classmate wrote an op-ed in the *Collegiate Times*, and a reporter for the *Roanoke Times* picked up on it and developed a big front-page story, which then went to the *New York Times* (see Appendix A). Alerted that the *Roanoke Times* story was coming the next morning (see Appendix A-1), President Torgersen and his chief of staff appointed a committee of three — an **ad hoc Committee on Claudius Lee and Lee Hall** — to look again at that page, explore elsewhere, consider the meaning and significance of what they came across, and identify possible courses of action.

Torgersen gave committee members two additional instructions. (1) The report would “belong” to him, by which they understood that it would be entirely up to him, as long as he was president, whether to release it to the public (something it seems he never did). (2) He directed the committee **not to recommend any particular course of action** but, rather, to make “suggestions.” Actually, that last instruction, even if it appeared redundant in light of the first, freed the committee to differ among themselves regarding specific preferred outcomes and, in any case, to propose possible actions that might be mutually exclusive.

In the one week that the committee members had to prepare their report, among the material they came across was another page (108, see Appendix A), this one on the Pittsylvania Club of which Lee was also a leading member, and that page declared the group’s “motto”—“Hang ’em” — and, for an accompanying visual, presented an obvious lynching.

(Note: Most students in those days came from Virginia, and a typical way of grouping themselves was to organize clubs whose members came from various local areas. Lee came from Pittsylvania County — the Danville area, Virginia’s deepest South, whether in the 1880s or the 1960s — and had been living there a dozen years earlier, and was

quite possibly present for, when a famous contrived racial incident occurred that was designed for, and proved fabulously successfully at, bringing to an absolute end a biracial regime, a black–white coalition called the Readjusters, that had dominated Danville city and Virginia state politics for the previous few years.)

Those two pages of the 1896 *Bugle*, individually and in combination, unambiguously promoted a domestic terrorist approach to life.

One page, the one first discovered, and incidentally the only one typically referenced in any subsequent discussion of the matter, called forth the organization that, especially in its first incarnation in the years around 1870, embodied the use of rape and political assassination, quite aside from the incineration of black churches and black schools, as social and political weapons.

The other page, the lynching page, was, to the 1997 committee, even more repulsive, repugnant, sickening. It celebrated the awful act, which was carried out with particular frequency precisely in the decade of that year's *Bugle* publication.

The committee conveyed its report on November 11, 1997 (see Appendix B), as well as a follow-up report on February 11, 1998 (see Appendix C). Over the years, a number of the committee's "suggestions" came to pass, including an honorary degree for Irving L. Peddrew III (the first African American to enroll, in 1953; he chose to leave after three years) and a residence hall named for Peddrew and Charlie L. Yates '58 (the first black student to graduate from Tech). But nothing was done of the sort that any member saw as necessary regarding Lee Hall. The name remained.

Claudius Lee Returns: 2004–05

Seven years later, in October 2004, the issue came up again, occasioned by a series of racist occurrences on campus. This time, addressing it involved the **Commission on Equal Opportunity and Diversity**, an appropriate body at the time readily available for the task. The Commission relied in part on the 1997 materials and in part on a series of witness hearings. Its report (Appendix D), dated January 31, 2005, made many of what were clearly "recommendations" to the president, some short-term, some medium-term, and some longer-term.

President Steger gave his official response (Appendix E) on September 29 that year, eight months after the report had reached him. Among major recommendations, to be implemented in the medium or longer term, the president resisted and took "under

advisement” two items: an honorary degree for Irving Peddrew (the 2005 report cited the 1997 report as having suggested that) and, as it stated, “a new name for New Residence Hall East to complement Peddrew-Yates and counter the impact of the Lee Hall name.”

The Commission expressly chose not to recommend a change of name for Lee Hall. In lieu of a change of name, the Commission’s various recommendations were designed to ensure, as the 1997 committee had had in mind, that the episodic occasion give rise to a permanent engagement with Claudius Lee, Lee Hall, and the controversy. The CEOD requested, and was granted, authority to continue monitoring developments.

Largely under CEOD direction, and with the support of various campus units, a lot of short-term recommendations achieved some level of implementation. Within a few years, even much of that went away. In the end, not only did the name remain, little appears to have taken place of long-term consequence.

Claudius Lee, Yet Again: 2020

Years passed, and in June 2020 — in the context of worldwide demonstrations in the aftermath of a series of high-profile white-on-black killings by men acting as law officers, especially the murder of Mr. George Floyd in Minneapolis in broad daylight by a uniformed officer of the law — a petition circulated and quickly gained many thousands of signatures to take Lee’s name down. Supporters included students who had served as resident advisors in Lee Hall and knew how much unhappiness and pain the name had often caused. President Tim Sands tasked the Council on Virginia Tech History to consider the issue and recommend a course of action to him.

Two dimensions of the Claudius Lee saga became central for the Council in making its recommendation. (1) This is a residence hall, and hundreds of young lives every year engage inside that particular structure in the process of becoming who they will be; it is their home. (2) Lee stands out precisely because of those two ineradicable pages.

Without exception, every Council member present for a lengthy discussion (by Zoom of course) saw change as imperative. Council members emphasized various dimensions that concerned them the most, and certainly phrased them variably, as they made their way to a shared conclusion.

In short, the inescapable combination of pages 101 and 108 in the 1896 *Bugle* compels our response. To summarize:

- It is time to review monuments, and a named building is a monument;
- The name causes unnecessary pain, and if we can ease that pain, this is a moment in time to use naming for a path for the future;
- It is uncomfortable for students to be in or walk by; documents suggest sanctioning murder of Blacks in 1896;
- It is an institutional symbol that inflicts gratuitous pain;
- The name creates trauma; it is OK to undo things that matter to the climate; and this is a symbol that can be changed;
- It creates an open wound for people of color;
- It continues to emerge as an issue and will not go away;
- It is painful to live in a building where conversations are inevitable about why a school would honor someone who didn't like people of color;
- Galileo and Hypatia living learning communities exist in a place where the students are "branded" with a name that reflects trauma and hate;
- Students do not feel comfortable living there;
- Symbols can become obstacles and create an unnecessary noise and distraction to institutional goals, mission, and objectives.

Our primary recommendation: Lee's name must be promptly removed.

Council's Deliberations on Renaming

After determining that Claudius Lee's name must go, Council moved directly to consideration of one or more possible replacement names. Spirited discussion put a number of names into play. As they prepared for a follow-up meeting, Council members considered several key criteria:

- Impact to Virginia Tech
- Recognizing people of color
- Acknowledging the current national conversation on race and racism
- Council's commitment to elevating silenced histories
- Recognizing the use of the structure as a residence hall and the home of Living Learning communities

Several additional key criteria shaped the outcome. Was any particular nomination sufficiently related to the residence hall experience? Were we sufficiently comfortable

that we knew enough to commit to any given selection? Was the person still living and thus would have to be approached as to whether being selected was agreeable (and if so, then under which name)?

In the end, an elderly couple named Janie and William Hoge seemed a simply compelling choice for the structure to be only formerly known as Lee Hall. As the next section details, Mr. and Mrs. Hoge were crucial to the survival and success of the pioneer African American students at Virginia Polytechnic Institute. From 1953 through 1960, the Hoges hosted a small number of young men who had been admitted as engineering undergraduates but who, on racial grounds, were denied rooms on campus.

The building currently named for Lee is a residence hall, precisely the kind of structure that the pioneer black students were not permitted to live in, the reason they boarded with the Hoges. It houses two Living Learning Communities, both of them in engineering, the area of study that the students staying with the Hoges were required to follow if they wished to remain enrolled at VPI.

Moreover, the Hoge name represents the broad array of other people who, in so many roles, throughout the years, have, invisibly and unsung, supported the campus's more obvious and recognized functions. Doing so, the name acknowledges the range of close connections between campus and community.

Most of all, it brings into focus a core way in which a campus constituency, long exclusive, has become more inclusive. Across four centuries, racial privilege or proscription has been at the center of social, economic, legal, and political life in America in general and in Virginia in particular. William and Janie Hoge came across center stage in the historical drama of Virginia Tech at the very moment that they could facilitate an end to the most intractable barrier to inclusion of all.

More broadly, the hall currently named for Lee reflects — its residents embody — the shift from an exclusively male student population to a mixed constituency, as well as from a categorically nonblack student population to one with no racial barriers in place, and from a campus all of whose students had to be in the corps of cadets to one where the corps is an important option but most students are civilian.

And it represents the broad curricular expansion that came in the 1960s in that, while many residents are in some branch of engineering, others major in English, history, music, or a range of other areas of study that did not come on stream until just about the very time that Tech began proactively to recruit black students, no longer giving only

grudging and partial access. Those later black students could major in anything Tech offered, engineering or not.

When the 1997 committee members issued their report, they urged that a campus building be named after pioneer African American students. They specified Irving Peddrew, Charlie Yates, and James Whitehurst as the most obvious candidates. Some years later, in 2003, on the fiftieth anniversary of Peddrew's enrollment, Peddrew-Yates Residence Hall was dedicated.

Now, more years later, Council recommends that a second campus building carry African Americans' names. Pioneer black student recognition gained approval, and now crucial non-student black contributions will gain recognition. The couple who made Peddrew, Yates, and Whitehurst possible are, per Council recommendation, to be given companion honors, and in a residence hall very near Peddrew-Yates.

Janie and William Hoge

The pioneer black students at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, all six who were admitted between 1953 and 1956, lived off campus their entire time at the school. They had to. The institution required them, as underclassmen, to join the corps of cadets for at least their freshman and sophomore years. But it refused them, as African Americans, the privilege of living in the barracks. (In another key restriction, they could be admitted as students only if they studied engineering, a curriculum unavailable at Virginia's public black land-grant school, Virginia State College.)

Each was informed that, as the admission letter to Essex Finney in 1956 phrased it, school officials had "arranged for you to live with" a black couple in Blacksburg, whose house was at 306 Clay Street. Their home is no longer standing so cannot be visited, but it played a central role in facilitating the beginnings of African American enrollment at Virginia Tech.

William Hoge Sr. and his wife, Janie Hoge — both of them born in the 1880s, the children of former slaves — were each in their late 60s or early 70s when Irving L. Peddrew III arrived in Blacksburg in 1953. Over the years, Mr. Hoge had been a laborer or a farmer, and then he worked in the construction business. In the 1930s and 1940s the couple were boarding a number of other African Americans in their home on Clay Street, some of whom — for example Fred Caldwell, a barber — worked at the nearby Virginia Polytechnic Institute. It isn't that no African American ever set foot on the campus before the 1950s, but never as a degree candidate at VPI (let alone as faculty).

By the 1950s, their son, William Hoge Jr., was married and living in Tidewater Virginia, not far from where the first five black students came from as they embarked on the great experiment of working toward a degree on a campus that had never before made it even possible for an African American to enroll. By then the only people living with Mr. and Mrs. Hoge were two men who worked in the VPI barbershop, including Mr. Caldwell. And then came the pioneer black students of VPI.

The couple agreed to provide housing and much more to one teenager, Irving Peddrew, who was 300 miles away from home, then took in three more the next year: Lindsay Cherry, Floyd Wilson, and Charlie L. Yates. By 1959–60, the Hoges' last year of boarding Tech's black students, a total of eight — the entire roster admitted during those years, never more than four enrolled at a time — had been part of their household, including Matthew M. Winston Sr., Essex E. Finney Jr., Robert G. Wells, and James Leslie Whitehurst Jr. By 1961, after much pressure from Whitehurst before his junior year, the few black students could finally live on campus.

Regarding the care and feeding of their boarders, Lindsay Cherry has said of Mr. and Mrs. Hoge that they were simply vital to the beginnings of black enrollment at Virginia Tech: "If there were heroes from the integration of VPI, it is these wonderful souls," he says, and "we should never forget them." He goes on to make a plea: "I sincerely hope we can rebuild their home one day soon, using it, rightfully, as a Virginia Tech extension, and having it serve as a reminder of their unselfish care and dedication to our cause," a cause, he points out, that reverberates down through the years since the first African Americans enrolled at Tech.

When growing up in the 1890s (at about the same time that Claudius Lee was a student at VPI), neither of the Hoges had a lot of schooling, Mr. Hoge having gone through the third grade, Mrs. Hoge through grade 7. Well into their adulthood, the U.S. census indicated that Mr. Hoge was able to write a little but not read. Now, in the twilight of their lives, he and his wife were playing a key role in opening up an institution of higher education to a much younger generation of black Virginians.

This is a good summary of the Hoges and their significance to the beginnings of African American enrollment at Virginia Tech. Far more eloquent is the testimony of one of the pioneer black students (already quoted above) who benefited from what the Hoges provided him and his black classmates. Lindsay Cherry, who came to VPI in 1954, one year after Irving Peddrew blazed the way, drafted the following language last year as part of an effort to see that the Hoges be commemorated on a marker somewhere on campus:



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Commemorating the Lives of Janie and William Hoge

Residents of 306 East Clay Street
Blacksburg, Virginia

Who, starting in 1953, provided room and board
For the pioneer African American students
To attend Virginia Polytechnic Institute:

Irving Peddrew
Floyd Wilson
Matthew Winston

Charlie Yates
Lindsay Cherry
Essex Finney

Offering love, compassion, and guidance to those young trailblazers

Who were in search of a better life, for themselves and for others

Going Forward: Four Actions

Beyond **taking down the name Lee** and **putting up the names Janie and William Hoge**, Council proposes two additional steps, each of which it deems essential — though those first two are clearly of the highest priority for prompt action. One has to do with **signage**, the other with establishing criteria and a process for **addressing other names** that come under scrutiny as well as identifying prospective names to honor.

Consistent with the 1997 report, current Council members have expressed the need for the university to establish criteria and a (transparent) process, both for selecting new names (whether to replace old names or to go on buildings currently without) and for addressing subsequent movements to rename a structure.

During Council discussion of Lee Hall, members expressed a wish that the university become “proactive” on these matters: (1) taking the initiative, rather than waiting on protests, for exploring the merits of taking down a name, as well as (2) preparing in



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advance a list of names — closely associated with Tech history — worthy of being honored in whatever fashion, in particular by going up on a building.

Names that Council considered before converging on the Hoges are already in play, though they tend to await further vetting or more appropriate venues. In addition, Council has already initiated conversations with various groups on campus inviting their members to come up with names for consideration. Casting a wide net among interested parties is likely to introduce promising new names.

In sum, **Council's main recommendations at this time are four:**

- **Promptly remove Lee** from the building currently bearing his name;
- replace that name with **Janie and William Hoge**;
- authorize **signage** and also a web presence for these histories; and
- establish **guidelines** for future actions regarding names and buildings.