

The Anderson Sisters Try to Save the Nannie Jordan House from Demolition

PRELUDE

From The Architecture of Historic Rockbridge, by J. Daniel Pezzoni (2015, Historic Lexington Foundation):

IN 1939 an “uncared-for and forlorn” house on Lexington’s Main Street came under imminent threat of demolition. The Nannie Jordan House, also known at the time as the James R. Jordan House, had come to the attention of the community four years earlier when historic architect A. G. Lambert studied it while on an inspection tour of Public Works Administration activities at VMI. Lambert offered a glowing report to the community.

“Lexington should prize and preserve this fine example of early American architecture. It is certainly one of the best examples of small two-story eighteenth century frame houses standing in Virginia today.” Lambert admired the house’s “superb” modillion cornice, its beaded weatherboards attached by wrought nails “with no attempt to conceal the heads, as we do in modern work,” and a Flemish bond chimney with an unusual decorative detail: vertical lines of glazed headers which

followed “both sides of the chimneys to the ‘haunches’ [shoulders].”

The threatened house, which was believed to date to within a few years of the town’s establishment in 1778, galvanized interest in historic preservation.

THE BUILDING came to be owned by Washington and Lee University, which said it would be too costly to rehabilitate, and announced a plan to demolish it.

In 1939 and 1940, Mrs. Ruth Anderson McCullough and Miss Ellen Graham Anderson – two sisters interested in historic preservation but apparently working independently – tried to save it. They were undoubtedly motivated, at least in part, by family tradition; the house had once been owned by their great-great grandfather, William Alexander, an early patron of Washington and Lee University’s predecessor institutions.

The sisters were unsuccessful, of course. Mrs. McCullough’s effort,



The Nannie Jordan House just before it was demolished in 1940. The Willson-Walker House (now Macado’s) at at the left. The Troubadour Theater is at the right.

which involved mobilizing the citizenry in a campaign of public pressure, resulted in formation of the Rockbridge Historical Society, the group having been unable to raise enough money to buy the property.

Miss Ellen Anderson appealed directly to the college decision-makers. Those men, however, seemed to have little interest in dealing with her.

President Francis Pendleton Gaines, in one letter, said her correspondence had mysteriously not reached him.

Here is the letter in which Mrs. McCullough made her appeal directly to the university president, and the trustees' response.

Here also is Miss Anderson's letter, perhaps blunter and more impassioned, addressed to the board's

executive committee. Although there is a smattering of correspondence in the university archives on anodyne topics between Miss Anderson and President Gaines in 1940, they contain no response to this letter.

These documents are from the W&L trustees' papers in Special Collections, Leyburn Library.

RUTH McCULLOUGH TO FRANCIS PENDLETON GAINES

My dear Dr. Gaines:-

The enclosed clippings give some idea of the architectural and historical value of an old frame house owned by Washington & Lee and now in dilapidated condition. Only in the last few years have we, in Lexington, appreciated its historical significance, and that is largely due to the insight of a trained architect from the Williamsburg Restoration, Mr. Lambert.

As a member of the Board of Trustees of Washington & Lee won't you inquire into its history and preserve it as a reminder of our pre-Revolutionary heritage? Authentic colonial houses are rare and irreplaceable.

My own interest must be hereditary! My father's whole life was devoted to the college. His last days were concerned with its welfare and comforted when you were at the helm. My grandfather was Rector of the Board. My great great grand

father (a friend of William Graham) as told by his son Dr. Archibald Alexander of Princeton, "made a donation of as much land as was needed for the buildings of Liberty Hall."

The present buildings stand on land owned by him and his son, Andrew Alexander. Perhaps this inherited desire to preserve the rare historical landmarks may be accepted as apology for begging your personal attention at this busy time.

Gen. Lee's garden, planned and planted by himself is gone, it could have been saved in its perfection, if those who really cared had acted in time.

So many relics that the last thirty years would bring back are irreparably destroyed. I, and others who care, beg you to find some way to save this landmark.

Respectfully,

Ruth F. Anderson McCullough
(Mrs. Charles McCullough)

Mrs. McCullough's letter is undated but clippings are enclosed from the Rockbridge County News of April 13, 1939.

BOARD RESPONSE TO MRS. McCULLOUGH

[Trustees minutes, June 8, 1939]

The following resolution was adopted:

Resolved: That the Board expresses its appreciation of the interest of Mrs. Ruth F. Anderson McCullough in the matter of the restoration of the dwelling at 32 North Main Street, known as the Jordan house, and the worthiness of the idea as set out in the communication and enclosure sent by her to the members of the Board. The Board reports that it has no funds available to be used for the purpose, but will, as the contribution of the University towards the desired end, arrange to transfer title of the Jordan house to the town of Lexington or to any corporation, association, or body which may be approved by the Board, and which will take over, restore and maintain the said house for purposes of historic or sentimental interest, such conveyance to be subject to the condition that if it should ever cease to be so used and maintained, it shall revert to the University.

**ELLEN GRAHAM
ANDERSON
TO BOARD OF TRUSTEES**

January 17, 1940

Executive Committee

Washington & Lee University

In reference to the beautiful old house now referred to as “The Jordan House,” but bearing evidence of being the only pre-revolutionary house left in this town, I wish to make a strong plea for more time to preserve and restore this invaluable building.

Washington & Lee University is indeed fortunate in owning this property. It was once owned by my own great-grandfather, whose son Andrew Alexander was a member of the board of Washington & Lee in 1834. The uncle of that same William Alexander who owned the property was Robert Alexander, founder of your university.

Along with its historical value, the house has a beautiful stairway, three mantels, doorways and window frames, all of which could be preserved in another house; but as it stands it can be restored, in time. The beams are strong and the chimneys unusual.

I feel, as a representative of a family connected with your school since its very founding, and once owner of the land now occupied by

your Main Building [Washington Hall], a profound and deep sentiment for everything connected with it. Any really old building you own is part of this inheritance.

If time is given, the house can be shut up, for safety. It can be well scrubbed and cleaned out, and minor repairs made.

Our town council surely will see eventually that their condemning of our valuable old houses, steeped in associations, is most shortsighted. Once gone, we have nothing left to show our past, except the other buildings at Washington & Lee.

It also appears that an important group of men, such as your board, could strongly influence our town council to allow these houses to stand where they are.

I approached your treasurer with an offer to save the woodwork of the old house in question and move it, but found I am completely unable financially to achieve this myself. Given time, the Rockbridge and Lexington Historical society can no doubt do so. But the house is more interesting standing where it was built.

I learn of only one complaint of fire risk, from Harry Walker. His complaint is of an open wooden house — not closed up. The house is no more dangerous than any of the hundreds of frame houses and sheds in our

town; indeed, it is less so, being “brick-nogged” in construction,* and it can be made a useful building.

I also ask that all woodwork of the old “Gibbs” house be saved — since that is another of our really old houses.

It is my request that this petition be read to the Board of Washington & Lee University since my family has now no male representative to appear before you and present our plea for preserving the old houses for future generations.**

The Town of Williamsburg is now becoming famous from the restoration of just such simple frame houses, many of them in worse condition than this house, which was probably built by Isaac Campbell before being bought by William Alexander.

Trusting my plea may give us more time to save this valuable landmark, and with best wishes for the prosperity of Washington & Lee University, I remain

Respectfully yours,

Ellen Graham Anderson

* *Rerferring to the layer of broken brick and plaster that was set between the exterior weatherboard and inside walls, as a form of insulation.*

** *Miss Anderson's and Mrs. McCullough's father, William Alexander Anderson, a former attorney general of Virginia, had been a member of the university board for 45 years (1885-1930) and rector of the board for 12 of those years.*