



Lexington Greet Two Visitors

The visit on May 23, 1964, of the first U.S. president ever to visit Lexington while in office, Lyndon B. Johnson, for the dedication of the George C. Marshall Library is well documented; so is the 1891 dedication of the statue of Thomas J. (Stonewall) Jackson, which brought 30,000 people to a town one-tenth the size of that crowd. In an address to the Rockbridge Historical Society, from which this article is excerpted, Matt Paxton noted those two occasions and celebrated two lesser-known but similarly extravagant visits from men who remain at the top of the American pantheon.

By M. W. Paxton Jr.

Rockbridge Historical Society, April 22, 1968

WHEN BLACK JACK PERSHING CAME TO LEXINGTON



GEORGE C. MARSHALL was associated with another of Lexington's great occasions: the visit of General John J. Pershing on June 18 and 19, 1920.

Pershing came here at the invitation of General Edward West Nichols, superintendent of Virginia Military Institute, to present diplomas to graduating cadets. And, to quote an account of the day, "through the patriotic suggestion and efforts of one of General Pershing's officers in France, Captain Greenlee D. Letcher, he was entertained as a guest of the town and county on a visit to the tombs of the South's two great chieftains."¹

Among those who accompanied the commander-in-chief of the nation's armed forces to Lexington "in two high powered machines" was Colonel George C. Marshall, then of Pershing's staff.

Pershing's reception here was described as a "great spontaneous, hearty ovation." Reported the *County*

News: "All who remember the tremendous gathering here on the greatest day in Lexington's history, when in 1891 the statue of Stonewall Jackson was unveiled at his tomb, agree that there has been no such gathering since in Lexington."

Arriving in town by car at 3 p.m., Pershing was welcomed with a 17-gun salute from the VMI cadet battery. He attended parade and the superintendent's reception that evening.

The next day at noon he presented diplomas to 62 graduates of VMI and made a "seven minutes' speech of wise counsel."

At 2 p.m. he alighted from an automobile near the Lee Chapel at next-door Washington and Lee University, accompanied by Captain Letcher, representing the hosts for the day. Meeting him there were a squadron of more than 100 horsemen, a company and, nearer, a platoon — all in khaki. The platoon, made up of men wounded and decorated in France, served as an escort of honor to accompany General Pershing to the chapel.

Along the pathway to the chapel had gathered a great throng of schoolchildren, and as the general strode smartly up the hill, three small children stepped into the walkway with a huge bouquet of roses.



1915-20 (?), LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

¹ *Rockbridge County News* [predecessor of the *News-Gazette*], June 24, 1920. Greenlee Letcher, a VMI graduate and son of Virginia's Civil War governor, John Letcher, was a Lexington lawyer and politician.

Reported the *County News*:

This array halted the general with a suddenness that no German could have, but his dilemma was easily solved as, taking the bouquet, he bent low and kissed the cheeks of each of the little girls.

As he entered the chapel, the large assembly arose. Upon the platform sat a contingent of grey-headed Confederates and the faculty of the university in cap and gown; to each of whom General Pershing gave a smile and a handshake.

University President Henry Louis Smith stepped forward and said: "Speaking for the people of this Valley and this county of Rockbridge, I welcome the Hero of 1918 to the last resting place of the Hero of 1861."

The honored visitor responded, "Nothing could come to one that would arouse a deeper sentiment than to be classed as I have been with the name of Lee."

The General then placed an ivy wreath upon the recumbent statue and saluted. After speaking to some of the parents of boys killed in the recent Great War, he returned to his car and moved at the head of "a triumphal procession" to the cemetery.

A platoon of horsemen commanded by Lieutenant Charles S. Glasgow rode at the head of his automobile. Cars containing army officers and Confederate veterans immediately followed. All were decorated in red, white and blue. Then followed a squadron of cavalry, and after that group came a company of infantry commanded by Major A. W. Robertson. Then came a stream of decorated automobiles filled with patriotic citizens which in number seemed to have no end.²

Pershing's passage up Main Street was marked by cheers from a throng which "filled every outlook. National colors waved from many homes and places of business."

At the cemetery, General Pershing placed a wreath at the Stonewall Jackson statue and after giving a brief tribute in which he called Jackson "a great strategist and a Christian hero" he passed along the line of veterans, personally greeting those wearing wound stripes and decorations.

² Charles S. Glasgow (1889–1962) and A. Willis Robertson (1887–1971) lived in Lexington. Both were Democratic politicians, Glasgow locally and Robertson eventually as U.S. Senator from 1946 to 1966.

**WHEN THE GREAT COMMONER
CAME TO TOWN**

WILLIAM JENNINGS BRYAN may not have been as universally revered in his day as General Pershing was at the close of the Great War, but when he made an appearance here in 1908 he was presented by President George H. Denny of Washington and Lee as "the foremost citizen in private life in the United States today."

Bryan's lecture here on March 23, 1908, was sponsored by the United Daughters of the Confederacy, and its proceeds went to benefit the Jackson Memorial Hospital, which had been opened by the UDC in Stonewall Jackson's former home on East Washington Street less than a year earlier.³

Bryan arrived in town by train at 1 p.m. on the day of his lecture. He was welcomed by an official reception committee and by members of the Bryan Club of Washington and Lee. This group at the college was, reportedly, the first such club in Virginia, which would see the Great Commoner nominated later that year for the presidency by the Democrats for the third time.

The train, crowded with residents from Buena Vista and from the Natural Bridge district, had been held for five minutes in Buena Vista so that Mr. Bryan could greet the crowd that had assembled there to hear him.

³ The event took place at the town skating rink on Main Street, and tickets were 50 cents for general admission, 75 cents for reserved seating.



1908, LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

His itinerary included an informal reception at the Lexington Hotel, where he dined just after his arrival; a 30-minute reception by the UDC at Jackson Memorial Hospital; the lecture itself, held at the town skating rink at 3 p.m.; a battalion review at VMI at 5:40; tea at Greenlee D. Letcher's at 7; and an address to the VMI cadets and W&L students in Jackson Memorial Hall at 9.

He reached his room at the hotel a short time before 11 and left at 4 a.m. to fill a speaking engagement in Clifton Forge.

Bryan's easy manner and his sense of humor won him a wide following here.

A young boy who was presented to him commented that he wanted to shake the hand of the next president of the United States, and Bryan quickly replied, "And I want to shake his hand, because he might be president before I am."

The *County News* reported that at the hospital reception the Daughters of the Confederacy agreed "that they didn't care a rap for Mr. Bryan's position on the ownership of railroads, but voted him a most agreeable man to

talk to and exceedingly good to look at." The news article described him as "a portly man of medium height whose broad countenance wears an expression of benignity. . . . The set of his mouth which is ready to smile, indicates that firmness, or what some would call stubbornness, and that courage that has marked his public career."

About 900 people assembled to hear Mr. Bryan's public address. He gave them a choice of four topics: "The Prince of Peace," "Observations in Foreign Lands," "The Value of an Ideal" and "The Average Man." Rising votes were called for and finally "The Average Man" was selected on the second ballot.

The local paper noted that Bryan wove considerable politics into his lecture. "As a stump speech it was ideal," the paper commented.

He spoke deliberately, without apparent effort in a voice noteworthy for its musical cadence and a power which made it as audible 100 feet away as it was immediately in front of him. He indulged in few oratorical flights, but was "a master of simple statement in simple, chaste English." His power to excite laughter was "irresistible."

The crowd heard him with apparently unabated interest from 3 until 5:20. 

Matthew W. Paxton Jr. (1927–2023) was the longtime, influential editor and publisher of Lexington's *News-Gazette* and a prominent leader in civic and historical activities.