

JOHN R.L. JOHNSON, Jr.

John Lee Johnson came to William and Mary in 1926 as a transfer student from Radford State Teacher's College. His father, J.R.L. Johnson, had been a student here in the 1890s, joined the English faculty in 1928 and served in that position for about thirty years. His son graduated in 1928, later worked for Earl Gregg Swem in the college library, and went on to Harvard Law School. For many years he was legal counsel to Hercules Powder Company in Wilmington, Delaware. He has served on the alumni society board and as its president, and from 1970 to the present (1976) he has been a member of the Board of Visitors. Currently he is rector of the board.

INDEX SHEET

Interviewee J. R. h. Johnson, Jr.Date of interview August 18, 1976Place Tucker-Coleman Room, Swem library, W&MInterviewer Emily WilliamsSession number 1Length of tape app. 65 mins.

Contents:	Approximate time:
dedication of OBK Hall (1926)	2 mins.
description of college in 1920s	3 mins
J. h. Hall stories	4 mins.
evaluation of academia preparation	4 mins.
student life in 1920s	5 mins.
J. A. C. Chandler	1 min.
personal course of study	2 mins.
relations between town + college at start of Restoration	7 mins.
E. G. Swem	3 mins.
alumni duties, concerns	9 mins.
as member of Board of Visitors	
- appointment (1970)	5 mins.
- issues, problems	10 mins
Miscellaneous	5 mins.

Indexing Terms Used

Chandler, Julian Alvin Carroll (AL, Fac, Pres)

Hall, John Leslie (Fac 1888/1928)

Johnson, John Rochelle Lee, Jr. (AL, Staff, BOB U)

Suven, Earl Gregg (Librarian)

Admissions -- c. 1975

Alumni Association

Athletics -- c. 1926-1929

athletics -- Football -- Scandal of 1951

Board of Visitors -- 1970-1976

Faculty -- c. 1975

Fraternities -- c. 1926-1928

Literary Societies

Student Life -- 1926-1928

Student Rules -- 1926-1928

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August 18, 1976

Williamsburg, Va.

Note: As the tape began Mr. Johnson was discussing the dedication of Phi Beta Kappa Hall in 1926.

Williams: None of the students were invited to the Phi Beta Kappa Hall dedication in 1926?

Johnson: Well, it's possible that the juniors and seniors were invited, but I don't recall it.

All we saw was the lineup of the people from all over the country, mostly members of Phi Beta Kappa. I suppose every chapter of Phi Beta Kappa from all over the country was invited to send a representative. It was a pretty good-sized group. It was my first introduction to academic regalia.

Williams: The first of many for you. You said you came here as a transfer student in 1926, and then a couple of years later your father came on to the faculty. From living in Williamsburg did you in that mid-1920s period find a sense of college community about the town that perhaps is lacking now?

Johnson: Very definitely it was a college town in those days. It was difficult to get to Williamsburg;

You had to get here by train or you had to cross the ferry, either from Newport News or Jamestown. Anyone who came by train had to transfer in Richmond because not many of the students were on the C&O line. Williamsburg was isolated in terms of the students being able to get away, too. The college was about the only thing here.

J.A. C. Chandler had done a tremendous job of recruiting during that period; as I recall they were down to 100 or 120 students in 1918 when it was made coeducational. When I came I think there were about 1300--that was in a relatively short period of time. He had a very competent faculty that he had assembled.

The reason I came here was that my dad was determined that I would study under Dr. John Lesslie Hall; he had studied under him himself. Dr. J.A. C. Chandler and my father were here in the 1890s at the same time (Dr. Chandler was a year ahead of my dad). They had had Dr. Hall and Dr. Stubbs. Dr. Hall I believe was the only one of the "Seven Wise Men" still living. At that time he was in his early seventies, but he was still a very vigorous teacher--and a very

eccentric one. He was popularly known among the students as "Monk" Hall because he was shrivelled up a little bit, and he one or two strands of hair that stood up on top of his head. He didn't have a very good set of false teeth. But he had some interesting eccentricities that convinced students that they'd better do some work: he had the reputation of never grading his papers. He'd throw them down the stairway, and your grade was determined by which step your paper fell on. That's a much maligned statement, because I'm pretty positive that he did pay us strict attention to what a person was doing in class. I can give you some personal anecdotes: for example, unknown to me my dad had written to him and told him to see to it that he kept my feet close to the fire. Being a bashful young man in those days I sat in the back of the room. So the first month in the class called, "Words and Their Ways in English Speech," a very fascinating course as he taught it, I made a grade of 60. Dr. Hall came in to the class-(he never called the roll) if you weren't in class within

five minutes he locked the door and you couldn't get in. You got marked down for not being there. So he said, "Lock the door, please." Then he went to the blackboard and drew a great big circle. He said, "This is Johnson going through the class with his tail cut off. Won't you come sit in the front of the class, Mr. Johnson?" So I sat up in the front from then on. I made 60 the first month, 87½ the second month, 100 the third month, and he gave me a grade of 90½, knowing that 91 would have been an A in the course. That's just one of the little eccentricities of a very great teacher. (I was taking Anglo-Saxon under him when he passed away.) Then Dr. Chandler invited ~~him~~ dad to come and take over Dr. Hall's classes. after I graduated.

Williams: How would you evaluate the academic preparation that you had here? You've said that the faculty was generally a very good one. You went on to Harvard Law School, which is one of the best, if not the best in the country. How did you feel that your preparation at William and Mary stood you?

Johnson: I would say that the average student who graduated

from William and Mary with an A or B average had no had difficulty at any school in the country.

Williams: Even though there was this recruiting of students to have a larger student body, you think the standards held?

Johnson: Strange as it may seem, a high school education was a very complete one in those days. I had a faculty member as a parent who saw to it that I worked. It was unthinkable to fail a class in my day. You weren't highly regarded in the family. It was good training. When I transferred from Radford State Teacher's College after the first two years I lost credits, but I was determined to graduate with my class, so I carried an extra load. But we had excellent instructors in every subject that I took; some were a little too good for me (for example, my background in French was terrible. I came into French class, and the teacher didn't speak a word of English during the class. Fortunately I slipped by with a passing grade.) But the atmosphere was excellent in that respect.

Among the very fine teachers of that period was

Dr. Young in physics, Dr. Davis in biology. I mentioned Dr. Hall in English, Dr. Geiger in philosophy, Dean Landrum in English. The head of the department at that time was Dr. Gwathmey. (Since I was an English major I remember the English faculty.)

De^s Among my contemporaries the first person in authority that I met was the man who is known as Dean Lambert. He was at that time in charge of the waiters in the dining hall, and he was a man of great authority.

Williams: What of social life at that time? At one time students had said that social life at William and Mary revolved around the fraternities and sororities and athletic events. What would you say for the period in which you were a student?

Johnson: Mores were quite different in those days. For example, we had a number of transfer students who had been shipped from Randolph-Macon for smoking (girls). The fraternities pretty much controlled the social life and to an extent the political life. The fraternities were active and

(I've forgotten how many there were). The fraternity boys--or right many of them--were athletes. Sigma Nu catered to the athletes, and the KAs were ladies' men.

The social life revolved around the campus because it was practically a shipping offense for a girl to be caught riding in an automobile. We had some pretty strict supervisors in the girls' dormitories. It's hard for a person your age to realize how changed conditions are.

They had dances. The fraternities organized dances in such a way that every girl had a card and if she didn't have a boy for every dance she was not popular--such silly social rules!

The athletics were a substantial part. The student body was behind the athletic policy and the football team made some surprising records. That was in the time of the famous Davis-to-Matsu combination (you've probably had someone to mention that to you). Art Matsu was the

Hawaiian quarterback (he's still living as far as I know). Meb Davis has been a coach for years in Virginia; he's probably retired now. He was an end, and they had a great passing combination known all over the eastern part of the country. I think it was in '28 they pulled out a 14-7 or 14-0 win over Harvard. We had a pretty good track team for competition among Virginia schools, but a very poor tennis team. "Scrap" Chandler was track coach.

Williams: Let me ask you a question about this gentleman you mentioned, Dr. Chandler. ~~Was your~~ father, did he take a special interest in you as a student? No?

Johnson: Dr. Chandler was interested in all the students. Most of the students regarded him as a stern and effective administrator. Those who didn't know him well I question whether they thoroughly liked him, partly because he was a little aloof from the rank and file of the students. Those who needed help got help from him. But he was a disciplinarian, and he ran a tight ship. There was never a student who was turned away for lack of funds by Dr. Chandler.

A man who can tell you personally about that is Lambert.

Williams: Yes.

Johnson: I fortunately didn't have to ask him for any help. I was so busy that I'm an awkward one to ask about the social life because I was trying to do two and a half years in two years.

Williams: You didn't have a job while you were here, as many students did, then?

Johnson: No. I guess I carried thirty or thirty-three hours every semester to get through, and I ended up taking a very strange course. I had English as a major, French as a minor, and physics as a minor. But I got interested in philosophy, so I took an awful lot of philosophy. I never took anything that I didn't find ^{useful} at a later date.

Williams: You would have been here just as the Restoration started; the property was being bought. Were students even aware of what was going to happen to the town? Would they have cared if they had known?

Johnson: I don't think they were aware. It's hard to visualize what Williamsburg looked like in those days.

For example, there was a large high school that stood where the Governor's Palace is. The Duke of Gloucester Street consisted largely of houses not in the best state of repair. The post office was a half mile almost opposite that open space across the Governor's Palace. Where the Capitol had stood the foundations had been covered over with about three feet of concrete. It was pleasant on a Sunday afternoon to walk down there, sit on them and philosophize about the world. But I did not know the townspeople at all; in fact, even after my family moved here since my dad was connected with the school my contacts were primarily with the school. Unless you were very gregarious there wasn't a great deal of contact. I fired funnaces for Dr. Hall's widow while I was taking my master's degree--and also for Vernon Geddy's mother.

Williams: Of the townspeople that you knew, what was their reaction to what was going to take place in the town?

Johnson: Many of them resented it; they were fearful. Many of them did not want to give up their homes. As a

result the Restoration had to make some arrangements with them to give them life tenancy.

I was working in the library when they were doing some of the early research work. They had very competent people doing it. Dr. Swem of course had laid a foundation for this over a good many years. I think he had the Frenchman's Map here that he had obtained from somebody's library collection. It was the key map in the restoration of the city.

Although there was no organized historic activity for Williamsburg or Yorktown in those days, there was a young man by the name of Lloyd Williams who had to work to get through school. (He subsequently worked for the local newspaper, the VirginianGazette.) He started his own program as a guide for Williamsburg, and I guess it was in 1929, when he went to work fulltime for the Gazette, he asked me if I would be interested in being a guide. So I was a guide in Williamsburg before the restoration. There was a Gray bus that came and made a tour of Williamsburg, Jamestown, and Yorktown. Without doing any

preparation, other than the little bit that I had had under Dr. Morton in Virginia history, (and that wasn't applicable particularly to colonial Williamsburg), I just adopted his line and got away with it very well until one day we had a busload of school teachers from Colorado. I was telling them some very interesting tale, and one of the ladies was an historian and challenged me. I learned a few things; it was a good education for a lawyer!

Williams: So there were people coming to Williamsburg even then?

Johnson: Yes, it was a regularly scheduled bus, and we took them on a two-hour tour, five days a week, In the summer it was run by the Grey Line. You didn't see much in detail if you only had two hours to go to Williamsburg, Jamestown, and Yorktown, so it didn't make too much difference what you told them!

Williams: Then you were here as a staff member under Dr. Swem. What kind of a person did you find Dr. Swem to be?

Johnson: A very gentle, kind, and interesting individual. He was a meticulous scholar, to the point of being interested in very tedious things like bibliography.

And he was interested in people and in encouraging young people to go into library work. He had hoped that Ed Simpkins, for example, would become a librarian; he became a lawyer.

Williams: Did he try to make a librarian out of you, too?

Johnson: Yes, he did. He got me a graduate scholarship to Emory University, and then Dr. Geiger got me a graduate scholarship at Chicago to study philosophy, and I went to Harvard and paid my own way!

Williams: You were going to tell the story of the Thomas Jefferson letters that Dr. Swem found.

Johnson: Dr. Swem wanted me to be on the lookout for a package of very important manuscripts that would be coming to the library. (At that time he was on leave in Washington, studying at the Library of Congress.) One day a month or so after he told me this I received through the mail a shoe-box wrapped in brown paper, part of which had been torn off, and tied with a simple string. The box was partly broken. I opened it, and to my surprise discovered 141 original letters of Thomas Jefferson's, which Dr. Swem had been trying to persuade two elderly ladies to give to the college for many years--uninsured, practically

destroyed in the mails. *

Williams: As you said, you went to Harvard Law School, and skipping on a number of years) you came on to the Board of Visitors.

Johnson: And I was on the alumni board and was president of the Society of the Alumni -- don't ask me the date, but I think it was 1959 or 1960.

Williams: From your alumni work what have you found is the greatest contribution an alumnus can make? Obviously money is the first thing that pops into a person's mind.

Johnson: I think the alumni are making a mistake in not encouraging a wide diversity of young people to consider William and Mary and not helping the admissions office screen them. The admissions office as it is presently operated has no interest in that whatever. They believe in using statistical data alone, and they are missing many important elements of people's personality and

* The manuscripts inventory reveals that 160 Jefferson letters were donated to the college in 1930 by a Miss Mary Churchill Short in Kentucky.

quality of people who ~~form~~ the background and heritage of that helped make this a great institution in its early days (through the early part of this century). Many schools take the same approach that the present admissions group takes. In fact, I think they resent recommendations because they don't know what to do with them; they don't know how to evaluate them. But if the alumni would serve as to help screen and guide the right type of student here I think we'd have a more superior school.

The alumni work when I was a member of the alumni board was primarily a matter of keeping people interested in the school and bringing them back to maintain that interest. The strength of the alumni organization has a good deal to do with the strength of the college. At times the alumni have been a very necessary, stabilizing influence at a time of potential major conflict and dissension on the campus.

Williams: Such as?

Johnson: An example was the time that the coaches presumably with the knowledge or the consent at least

of the administration get involved with bringing athletes here without regard to their secondary school preparation and improperly changing their records. Then the alumni just rose up and stood back of the board [Board of Visitors] to bring about a change of administration at that time. So the alumni interest in the quality of the school is very, very important. It's partly evidenced by the fact that they do help contribute. Because this school has for years been highly concentrated in the training of teachers our alumni ^[are not] ~~are not~~ a wealthy group. as are schools that have large professional schools in other fields besides education. The quality of the performance of the alumni in their chosen fields influences who decides to send his child to this school, and it does contribute to its reputation. So I think for the alumni to continue to have an interest in the school is important. After all, you can have the finest faculty in the world, but unless they have fine people to work with them

the classroom, the quality of the education will not be stimulating. As an example, I think that's why the law school has such a fine reputation: the quality of the student body was such that a dull and uninteresting faculty member could not continue to compete and survive. (Discussion of Mr. Johnson's experiences at Harvard Law School.) There was a rather intense, competitive atmosphere; I saw the same kind of atmosphere here at William and Mary. I don't know if it exists today or not. The faculty expected performance; they demanded it, and they flunked out people. I think now the attrition rate is pretty low, but presumed quality of entering students is higher than in the earlier days.

Williams: Now a few years after you were president of the alumni society you became a member of the Board of Visitors. Why do you feel that you specifically were appointed by--would it have been Governor Godwin?

Johnson: No, I was appointed by Governor Holton. The college administration and the alumni administration

and recommend whom they want appointed. The governor seemed to appoint mostly people who had been recommended by the alumni, so my name probably came up that way.

Williams: But that year Governor Holton appointed a number of people who probably weren't on the alumni list.

Johnson: Yes, he did. He was trying to build a Republican organization, and he picked people who had supported him. I was out of the state; I didn't know him. But I grew up in southwest Virginia, and people knew me probably put my name up, and he decided he'd pick me. I had nothing to do with it, I assure you.

Williams: When you were talking about admissions this occurred to me: would it serve any purpose to have a quota of 70/30 in-state and out-of-state members on the board in the same way that is done with the student body?

Johnson: I think V.M.I. was the first school in the state to ask the legislature to approve a specific bill to allow someone other than a citizen of Virginia to be a member of their board.

Any national school should have some representation from outside the state, in my opinion. As a result of V.M.I. getting it many of the schools in succession asked for it. William and Mary was granted permission to have three appointed from outside. I don't see anything magic about 70/30. In my day the major concern was that the school not be taken over by the ladies; in fact, I think at one time it was by statute that William and Mary had to take in 60 boys to 40 girls. Through the depression until after World War II the pressure particularly from out-of-state girls to enter this school has been high, I guess due to the fact that there were not too many schools of quality that were open to both girls and boys. The concern of most of the administration has been that we not get too lopsided in favor of the ladies because at least in the past it's been a man's world. We would like to maintain a broad base that covers many professions and many interests.

Williams: Have you found it to be a handicap to be an out-of state member of the Board of Visitors? As you pointed out you were brought up in Virginia.

Johnson: No, it's probably been a help in that I'm hard to find. I haven't had nearly as many calls, as rector as Harvey Chappell had. Maybe we're just going through a short period of tranquility before the real storm--I hope not.

Williams: YOU've been on the board for the greater part of six years. In those six years what would you cite as the most important issue that has come before the board?

Johnson: I would answer that by saying that the most important question from a board member's standpoint is how do you determine that you have a high quality, determined, dedicated, enthusiastic faculty? It is not a question that is easy to answer. It's a continuing problem because the substance of a college is the quality of the faculty and the quality of the students. I am assured by faculty and administration and admissions officers that we have a fairly good student body in terms of previous academic performance and diversity of extracurricular interests. We assert in strong language that we have an excellent, well-informed, highly respected faculty, which is difficult to

evaluate. The faculty can't compete financially with many other schools that also have attractive environments. This has been a major concern to me as a board member and continues to be.

The other is how do you convince the legislature that they should contribute an equal amount or more to a small school that is concentrating on alleged quality in environment and education when for less money they can produce in mass at larger campuses such as V.P.I.? That is a continuing problem since you have to get the major amount of your resources from the legislature. Furthermore, we have cut down on our growth in terms of undergraduate enrollment. The state actually has too many colleges to support, so we will face a period of continuing struggle to get our fair share. William and Mary is not getting its fair share. For example, it was pointed out at a faculty meeting that for the same set of courses, with the same background in number of years of teaching and quantity of degrees

there's a \$2000 differential between the University of Virginia and William and Mary--by legislation. I can see it where the University of Virginia has raised enough money to be able to supplement it with its own private endowment. But there's no justification for that difference. This is a major concern of this board at this time.

Williams: And what do you see your role as rector being in relation to the problem?

Johnson: We have to help the president to be able to convince the legislature and the State Council of Higher Education that they are wrong. The council of education is a powerful force here in setting up so-called peer groups, and the peer groups chosen are really children of this institution. V.C.U. and Old Dominion. We feel that William and Mary should be favorably compared with the Ivy League schools. Our costs as a public institution are considerably less than at the Ivy League schools. If you look at the entering classes William and Mary compares favorably in terms of secondary school education and test

with any of those schools. Therefore, we'd better have a reasonably well-paid faculty-- if they deserve it. I'm going to be concerned with being sure that we have tests to demonstrate that they deserve it.

Williams: You've answered then the question that I was saving for last: what do you see as the most important issue facing the board in the two years that you have as rector.

Johnson: Money--maintaining a competitive salary position for the good faculty that we have so that they are not attracted away on the basis of money alone. It's an attractive community to live in, but in many ways a very expensive community. ^{oral history} (Discussion of project and Mr. Johnson's contribution to it.)

One thing that was important [in my student days] that occurs to me: literary societies were an important part of the campus activity at the time I was here. There was the Philomathean and the Phoenix literary society. Debating teams were important.

Williams: Were you active in either of these groups?

Johnson: I was active in the Philomathean Literary Society, which was a debating-discussion group. It was an adjunct to classroom activity. It taught you to stand on your feet and speak--and very few people can do it in this country today. I never really learned it, but the opportunity existed. The literary societies went back to my dad's time as a student; they had a very good debating team in his day. In the state oratorical contest he won the medal against John W. Davis, who was at that time at Washington and Lee. I think they're missing something in not having a literary society because it encourages people to write , and from that they drew their debating team.