

# A YEAR, AND YEARS, OF NOTE

## Remarks for the Opening Convocation

August 28, 2018

When I arrived at Hampden-Sydney 26 months ago, every conversation conveyed a palpable sense that this was a college ready to take a leap—a leap in reputation and recognition; a school eager to offer its students even more educational opportunities, including new curricular offerings as well as an expanded array of co-curricular learning opportunities; a school that was eager to upgrade its facilities; and a school that did not just want to balance its budget, but have the financial resources to imagine a more ambitious future.

In the last two years, you, faculty and staff members, you have taken that leap. We welcomed last week one of the largest classes of freshmen in our College's history. Our reputation is improving among key high schools and markets around the country. Our new experiential learning initiative will change the way we teach our classes and it will involve many more of our students in internship, research, and off-campus study opportunities. Our new outdoor education program is ambitious and we will work to make it the finest of its kind in the country. Our campus is beautiful and is obviously tended with dedication and love, and it has been enriched by the addition of new and renovated facilities. Our employees are welcoming and kind and show care for each other like family.

And, just this morning, our Board of Trustees authorized us to obtain financing to build new residence facilities and begin renovating our existing residence halls. We have also received gifts and commitments totaling more than \$30 million toward our short-term goal of \$50 million in additional endowment. When this fundraising effort is complete, this \$50 million in new endowment will fund many curricular and co-curricular priorities and provide additional scholarship dollars, helping to ensure the affordability of a Hampden-Sydney education.

You, students, you took the lead in improving campus life. The College Activities Council increased student programming. Retention is up. Damage to college property is drastically reduced. Members of the Garnet & Gray Society do not have to explain broken beer bottles as they give tours to prospective students and their families. Alcohol and substance abuse cases requiring medical intervention and new sexual assault cases are all reduced. This is because of you and your work. We have asked you to own the student culture here, and you are rising to that challenge.

As improvements take place, and as our reputation and recognition rise, so does your stock. You are bonded not only to your brothers at Hampden-Sydney, but also to this College, for the rest of your lives. Continue these great trends. Continue to improve yourselves, and your brothers, and your College, and one day, your alma mater will serve as an exemplar for other colleges and universities even more than it does today.

While we have all been working together to enhance every aspect of Hampden-Sydney, we remain committed to our distinctiveness and identity as a college for men. For 243 years, we have pursued the timeless mission of forming good men and good citizens—a mission we accomplish by offering students a remarkable combination of rigorous academics, co-curricular learning opportunities, and

character development. We will continue to value rhetoric and the ability to communicate and think exceptionally well, and we will remain a place where civil discourse thrives; a place where integrity and honesty are valued over more superficial qualities. This will, I hope, always be a College where we look each other in the eye and speak to one another as we pass on the sidewalk.

At a time when liberal education is under attack from many quarters, it thrives here. Peter Lawler, the passionate defender of liberal education, offered this testimony to our work:

*...liberal education most securely flourishes on campuses with missions that are more than a brand. Some of our elite institutions have the right environment, but it is more reliability found at good schools with a basically religious understanding of who we are and what we're supposed to do. It's possible to include on this list those colleges that retain a genuinely classical or Stoic understanding, one concerned with a rational self-confidence when it comes to manners and morals such as Hampden-Sydney...*

We should all derive a great deal of satisfaction from hearing our College described in this way.

Seven years from now, we will celebrate the 250th anniversary of our College's founding. To prepare for this milestone in the life of the College, we will use these seven years to reflect on and celebrate important aspects of our College's heritage and legacy—those moments in our past that have made us the College we are today. 2018-19 is itself an important anniversary year for at least four major events that have contributed in significant ways to shaping who we are as a College. It is fitting that we begin our academic year by highlighting these important anniversaries.

First, this year marks the 50th anniversary of the opening of Gilmer Hall. Costing just over \$2 million, or nearly 2.5 times its original estimate of \$850,000, Gilmer Hall was quickly dubbed the "science palace" by Hampden-Sydney students in the late 60s and early 70s. We celebrate the innumerable contributions of faculty members who have taught and conducted research in this building and we honor the remarkable accomplishments of the many students they have taught. But even as we celebrate the work this grand building has hosted, we are developing plans to address the current and future needs and goals of our science curriculum, faculty members, and students.

This year also marks the 50th anniversary of the enrollment of the College's first African-American student, Alfonso White. At a time when we as a nation are as conflicted as ever about race, this anniversary challenges us to examine how far we have come as a College and a nation in creating a more inclusive society College and nation, and it also begs us to focus on the important, hard work that remains to be accomplished.

This is the 40th anniversary of our Rhetoric Program in its current form, though we can proudly trace our College's emphasis on rhetoric all the way back to its founding. The possibilities are endless for young men who know how to think critically and creatively, and to express themselves well, and so we take great pride in having Rhetoric as the keystone of our college's academic program. We will soon break ground on a new Rhetoric and Communications Center in the former Tiger Inn space and we look forward to celebrating the dedication of this new Center next spring.

Finally, 2018 marks the 40th anniversary of the publication of *To Manner Born, To Manners Bred*. Subtitled, "A Hip-pocket Guide to Etiquette for the Hampden-Sydney Man," this booklet is so much more. Pages 34 and 35 offer a step-by-step guide to tying a bowtie, and, if you still don't know

how to hold a fork properly, there's an illustration for you on page 55. But the greater value of this book is in reminding us of the ethos of the Hampden-Sydney brotherhood. In the Epilogue to the most recent edition, Tommy tells us that "character" is derived from a Greek word meaning "to shape, cut furrows, engrave." He also shares that "polite" is derived from a Latin word meaning "to polish, to make smooth." While politeness is the smooth and polished exterior we present to the world, Tommy reminds us that the character of a gentleman is cut into the furrows of his life and engraved on his heart.

To celebrate the anniversary of the publication of *To Manner Born, To Manners Bred*, I'm thrilled that its author, Thomas H. Shomo, has agreed to be our featured speaker today. Tommy has worked as alumni director at the Rutgers Preparatory School; he's been a restaurant owner and entrepreneur; and he has been a teacher. But, he has also devoted most of his professional career to this College and our mission "to form good men and good citizens." At Hampden-Sydney, Tommy served as an admissions representative, associate director of admissions, director of financial aid, acting dean of students, and for the 20 years from 1997 until his retirement in December of 2016, he served as director of the College's public relations, and marketing and communications efforts. I am grateful for the privilege to have worked with Tommy during my first six months here at Hampden-Sydney, and I feel equally privileged in calling him not only my colleague but also my friend. I welcome now, as our featured convocation speaker, Thomas H. Shomo, Hampden-Sydney Class of 1969, and author of *To Manner Born, To Manners Bred*.