

THE FUND FOR CLASSICAL EDUCATION
OFFICE OF THE CHAIRMAN

“For the promotion of tranquility, order and happiness of society, no provision can be more effectual than imparting the means of instruction to every class of people, particularly with regard to their moral and social duties...”
Samuel Stanhope Smith 1751-1819

12 June, 2010

Dear Friend,

Samuel Stanhope Smith, the seventh president of The College of New Jersey, (later Princeton) played a leading role in the founding of two academies. One of them, located first in Augusta County, Virginia, later became Washington College and still later Washington and Lee University. The other, Prince Edward Academy, of which Smith was appointed first rector in 1775, became in 1783 Hampden-Sydney College.

A Presbyterian minister, he is a worthy representative of the educators who laid the foundation for America’s greatness. He believed that universal access to classical education could create moral improvement in the new republic and establish “a society of habitual virtue.”

Just as surely as history has vindicated his educational vision, our current situation demonstrates what happens to a nation that turns its back on its best ideals and expels both faith and reason from its schools. When the ancient altars are torn down and the deep wells are stopped up and the only thing the schools teach is ciphering and gadgetry, those schools become a public menace. It would be better if students stayed home and studied at the kitchen table—which is what two million now do!

When *Pulp Fiction* passes for literature and digital graphics are considered art and state-certified teachers are so focused on “measurable outcomes” that testing and test preparation become the core content of the classroom, the game is pretty much over. Add to that merit pay for the tenured teachers who most efficiently program students to conform to federal “standards” and you have a situation in which bad pedagogy is incentivized and liberal learning becomes a luxury no school can afford.

It is difficult to write about this now. In America, we have already reached the point where we don’t know what we don’t know. In many a heart, the flame has died. Most policy makers have lost the spiritual sensitivity, cultural literacy and philosophical acuity essential for the kind of self-criticism that real renewal would require. In fact, they have been ruined by the very schools they created.

For decades training has passed for education and prosperity has paraded as success. Science has become a totem and the industrial model has crushed the *Akademia*. The Socratic conversation has ended. The Texas textbook wars have begun. Now, with two generations sacrificed to Baal and Ashera, it is difficult even to speak about education because the very topic assumes the thing in question. With whom would one speak? To criticize the public gulag is thought unpatriotic.

Isn’t it time for American’s to grow up? As a friend of mine—who is by no means a conservative—recently wrote to me, “We, as a society, have to get over the feel-good 60’s and get back to valid reality.”

What is valid reality? The reality is that a classical education is the only thing that can prevent the people of any place or time from believing their own press reports. Liberal learning is the only oxygen that could—if breathed—save us from asphyxiating on the world according to Larry King Live. The reality is that to Google something is not to know it—much less understand it. To join Oprah’s Book Club is not to

become literate. Advertizing and propaganda are just that—and nothing more. Great books in the hands of true teachers are all that stands between civilization and bedlam.

The most famous tombstone in the old cemetery in Sunbury, Georgia is the full-length marker for Reverend William McWhir. Born in County Down, Ireland on the 9th of September in 1759, he came to the United States in 1783 and settled in Alexandria, Virginia. At, at the age 26, he became the first Head Master of Alexandria Academy.

Like Samuel Stanhope Smith, McWhir was Presbyterian minister who believed that arts and letters where to be servants of manners and morality. He approached revealed religion as a science and science as an exploration of the mysteries of time and space.

Young McWhir was a dedicated teacher and sterling example who boarded General Washington's young nephews, George and Lawrence, in his tiny home. Even as the little boys learned from him, he learned from their famous uncle. In 1788 he was called to become the Principal of Sunbury Academy, at the time most famous School in South Georgia. There he stayed for thirty years until his death. So influential was his work that the State of George has erected a roadside marker pointing tourists to his grave.

As we open the old school again, we do not only honor George Washington. We honor Reverend William McWhir. We honor Dr. William Brown, the brilliant University of Edinburgh trained physician who came from Scotland and organized those early Alexandrians. We honor John Fitzgerald, William Baker, Samuel Hanson, William Hartshorne, Benjamin Dulany, David Stuart, Charles Lee, Isaac Keith, James Hendricks, Josiah Watson and Charles Simms. Each believed in a classical Latin school education for women as well as men, for blacks as well as whites and for the poor as well as the prosperous. All made real sacrifices to bring it to pass.

Having paid tribute where tribute is long overdue, I must say that the Fund is not re-opening Alexandria Academy as an expensive exercise in historical sentimentality. Opening Alexandria Academy continues to be the hardest task I have ever undertaken. Only the Author and Finisher of all things sustains the great work. The fact is boys and girls growing up Alexandria, Virginia at the end of the 18th century received a better education than boys and girls growing up in Alexandria, Virginia at the beginning of the 21st century. That should not be.

We honor the past by building the future—and we build the future by honoring the past. The prosperity, if not the survival, of our country depends upon the success of this effort and a handful of others like it around the country. Honestly, with just 87 days until the opening of school, I hardly have time even to write this letter. I do it earnestly praying for that one person—or two or three—who will step forward pledging with Washington to “to support the new institution as far as it is in my powers.” To that end, I remain,

Resolved & Faithful

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'T. Robinson Ahlstrom'. The signature is stylized with a large 'T' and a circular flourish.

T. Robinson Ahlstrom
Chairman & CEO