Washington and Lee University School of Law, Lexington, Virginia

[By Douglas May]

Washington and Lee University is a private liberal arts college in Lexington, Virginia, that has a prestigious and colorful past. The university was established in 1749 as Augusta Academy. In 1776 the name was changed to Liberty Hall. After George Washington endowed it with what was then the largest gift to a private educational institution in America, the trustees renamed the school after him.

In 1866 the Lexington Law School became affiliated with Washington College while Robert E. Lee was the college’s president, and the law school was made an integral part of the institution in 1870. After Lee’s death Washington College was renamed Washington and Lee University. The school of law has been a member of the Association of American Law Schools since 1920 and is approved by the American Bar Association.

Located in the small and scenic town of Lexington in Central Virginia, Washington and Lee University School of Law’s serene and intimate setting contrasts with the hectic environments of similar top law schools in the nation that are often located in crowded or urban areas. The law school also is unique in that it houses one of the smallest student bodies of the top law schools in the country. This contributes to an increased sense of camaraderie at the school, in contrast to the sometimes cutthroat competition at other law schools.

The school’s beautiful setting includes a row of brick buildings tracing back to 1824 that form the front campus, which is a US National Historic Landmark named Washington and Lee University Historic District. The Lee Chapel is also a National Historic Landmark. The noted British writer John Cowper Powys once called Washington and Lee the “most beautiful college campus in America.” The poet and dramatist John Drinkwater noted, “If this scene were set down in the middle of Europe, the whole continent would flock to see it!”

Since the 1970s the university has invested a great deal in upgrading and expanding its academic, residential, athletic, research, arts, and extracurricular facilities. The new facilities encompass an undergraduate library, a gymnasium, an art/music/theater complex, dorms, a student center, a student activities pavilion, and a tennis pavilion as well as renovations of the journalism and commerce buildings. Lewis Hall, the 30-year-old home of the law school, as well as athletic fields and the antebellum historic front campus buildings, are all currently undergoing major renovation.

Washington and Lee University School of Law is ranked 25th in the 2008 US News & World Report law school rankings. Mostly because Washington and Lee’s entering class consists of approximately 125 seats, less than half the number of seats at most other top law schools, applicants face a highly competitive admissions process. In most recent years the school has received nearly 3,000 applicants per year, usually granting approximately 800 acceptances. Similar to other law schools, Washington and Lee places primary emphasis on a candidate’s LSAT score and undergraduate GPA. The most recent entering class at the school, the class of 2010, vaunted a median LSAT score of 166 and a median GPA of 3.62.

Naturally, Washington and Lee takes other factors into account in the admissions process because of the small size of its student body as well as its honor system, a unique feature that entrusts students with a greater than usual amount of responsibility. Students are allowed to sit for unproctored exams, sometimes receive take-home exams, and are offered some flexibility in their exam schedules. The honor system has created a comfortable and safe environment throughout the law school and undoubtedly affects the law school in many ways, making the students’ three years at Washington and Lee an enjoyable experience. The school therefore searches not only for applicants with good grades and LSAT scores but also students that can enhance the intimate environment of the law school. Students who will contribute to the unique environment of the law school are highly sought.

For the 2007-2008 academic year, tuition at Washington and Lee was $32,800. More than 90% of the student body received some sort of financial aid, while approximately 60% of students received merit scholarships. Washington and Lee is easily one of the smallest of the nation’s top-tier law schools, and this creates an atmosphere of bright, motivated students and a student-faculty ratio of 11:1 with an average class size of 22.

According to the Princeton Review, the faculty at Washington and Lee ranks among the top 10 law school faculties in the nation. Because of the impressive 11:1 student-faculty ratio, coupled with an open-door policy that ensures that students can reach professors when they wish to, Washington and Lee students are given great opportunity to communicate with and learn from the distinguished faculty. Washington and Lee and its faculty are reputable in all areas of the law, and the school’s corporate law, international law, and health law programs are extraordinarily strong.

As for the school’s surroundings, many might find the city of Lexington to be uneventful, while others may consider it the perfect place to go to law school. With only a modicum of
bars and a total absence of nightclubs, the city does not afford the excitement that larger cities provide. This dearth of nightlife, however, creates a situation in which law students coordinate their own social activities, thereby helping to bring the student body together outside of the classroom. Students often throw parties, join together for a variety of intramural sports, and generally are a closer-knit group than the student bodies of other law schools. Lexington on the whole is a tremendously safe city, and the low cost of living is a great advantage to law students, who can find comfortable and even somewhat luxurious housing at a fraction of the cost of housing in larger cities.

Of the 2005 graduating class at Washington and Lee School of Law, 88.2% were employed nine months after graduation, and 93% of graduates who took the bar exam passed it in their first attempt. Fifty-three percent of graduates of the class of 2005 accepted job offers from private law firms with a median first-year salary of $85,000.

So if it’s a small top-tier law school in a small town atmosphere that you’re seeking, Washington and Lee School of Law is a good choice. The university offers applicants the opportunity to earn a JD degree in a rare intimate and friendly environment. The school’s peerless honor system fosters a tremendous amount of trust and respect between students and faculty and creates a unique ambience. Even though Lexington is not really a city conducive to bar-hopping and club-going, it provides a perfect atmosphere to study law for those who would opt for a social life that mostly involves their classmates.