

May 2022

Liberty University in Time and Memory

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Recommended Citation

Rist, Boyd C. (2022) "Liberty University in Time and Memory," *Bound Away: The Liberty Journal of History*.
Vol. 4: Iss. 2, Article 1.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/ljh/vol4/iss2/1>

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Liberty University in Time and Memory

(Editor's Note: Dr. Rist [1946-2014] was a pillar of Liberty University academics from 1973 to 2013, serving as a history professor, Chair of the Division of Social Sciences, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Dean of the Faculty, Vice-President for Academic Affairs, and Provost. He was instrumental in establishing the Liberty University chapter of Phi Alpha Theta, and its annual book award is named in honor of his father, Clifford F. Rist. On a personal note, Dr. Rist guest-lectured in my American Revolution course on Thomas Jefferson and the Declaration of Independence, and I remain indebted to his scholarship and wisdom.)

THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

“LIBERTY UNIVERSITY IN TIME AND MEMORY”

DELIVERED AT THE PHI ALPHA THETA BANQUET

By Dr. Boyd C. Rist

April 16, 2011

Introduction and Comments on Phi Alpha Theta

Norma Jean and I are pleased and honored to be a part of this special evening.

Before arriving at the focus of my remarks, I would like to offer a few observations on this organization.

I recall the founding of Liberty's Chapter of Phi Alpha Theta in 1982 as an important milestone in the development of the Department of History. Dr. Steinhoff has helped me recall a number of details surrounding the early years of the chapter that I believe are worth remembering. The Charter of Alpha Alpha Iota Chapter contains the names of eighteen charter members of the honor society. In addition to students, the charter lists the names of four faculty members still active in the life of the University – Dr. Cline Hall, Dr. William Matheny, Dr. Mark Steinhoff, and myself. Dr. Percival Perry of Wake Forest University represented the international headquarters at that very first ceremony. In the course of his comments, Perry quoted Ecclesiastes 11:1, “Cast your bread on the surface of the waters for you will find it after many days.” Dr. Steinhoff mentioned to me just a few days ago in an email communication that, as faculty advisor, he took the verse personally as a word from the Lord. Dr. Perry kindly wrote a warm letter to me on May 31, 1982, reflecting his experience at the installation. Allow me to read just a portion of his letter since I believe it sets such a positive tone for the development of Phi Alpha Theta at Liberty:

Now that things have settled down and I can draw a deep breath, my first thought was to write and say much I enjoyed my visit to Liberty Baptist College. I was much impressed with what I saw and enjoyed my visit very much. You have a beautiful setting for campus. All of you had obviously given your full commitment to Phi Alpha Theta. Dr.

Steinhoff had done an excellent job of organizing things, but it is also nice to have the chairman take an active part in the proceedings and lend the organization his full support. Your wife had done her share, too, in arranging the red roses... She has enough talent and charm for three ladies. From all the commitment I detected, I would say that Phi Alpha Theta is off to a very fine start on the Liberty College campus.

Next year this chapter will celebrate its thirtieth anniversary. Over the years, members have taken historical journeys of discovery to noteworthy historical sites up and down the east coast. Members have delivered excellent papers, exhibiting sound historical research, at regional competitions. You are the heirs to a proud tradition. As what I believe was Liberty's first discipline-specific honor society, you should justifiably feel a real sense of accomplishment in being a part of this select body of scholars.

Overview of Remarks: Tonight, my aim will be to focus on the history department and three very special colleagues under three broad headings: (1) The making of the Department; (2) Personal reflections; and, (3) Common denominators.

The Making of the History Department

Garrison Keillor, on one of his "Prairie Home Companion" shows several years ago, opined that he spent Saturday evenings describing to his audience a town, Lake Wobegon, that appeared very real until one actually began to look for it. In contrast, I will aim tonight, in my reflections, to talk about real people and a real place through time.

When Norma Jean and I came to Lynchburg Baptist College in the summer of 1973, I was the only full-time faculty member in the department. Over the next few years, we were able to add one more full-time faculty member. Still, the offerings were quite limited. Out of necessity, I taught fifteen different preparations in our first two-and-a-half years here – a bit crazy as I look back, but necessity demanded it.

I date the maturing of a full-fledged department to the arrival of Drs. Hall and Steinhoff in 1977, and Dr. Matheny in 1978. Bill's time at Liberty, by the way, came in two extended interludes, 1978-1985, and 1987-present. The interruption was occasioned by a brief return to South America to teach at a Baptist seminary in Ecuador. In looking back, I can see clearly that the arrival of my three colleagues in this critical time was transformational in terms of the future direction of the department.

As an American historian, I believe it is not an overstatement to refer to the quartet of Hall, Matheny, Rist, and Steinhoff, as the "Founding Fathers" of the History Department. I will return to that historical analogy a bit later in my remarks this evening.

Mark came to us from the borough of Queens, though he had grown up in Brooklyn. I learned about him from the conference on faith and history newsletter, a publication that

included positions sought by Christian historians. Mark had listed himself under that job search heading. He had just completed an excellent doctoral dissertation at NYU on the first secular profession in Medieval Europe – the Notariate. His study focused on the city of Ravenna from the 6th through the 13th centuries. My first thought, as I reviewed Mark’s formal academic credentials, was that if our young institution could persuade someone with degrees from Columbia, Johns Hopkins, and NYU to join the faculty, Liberty would indeed be fortunate. After Mark decided to come, he regularly taught upper-level courses in Medieval Europe, Ancient Greece and Rome, East Asian history, and other team-taught courses that I will reference shortly.

I made contact with Cline Hall in nearby Roanoke shortly after he completed his Ph.D. at the University of Tennessee. He had written his dissertation on the Southern clergy during the American Revolution. Cline was looking for his first full-time teaching position, and we were pleased that the Lord led him to Liberty. His signature upper-level courses have included history of the South, Colonial U.S., Civil War and Reconstruction.

Bill Matheny, for his first several years at Liberty, much to our chagrin, was captured by the Missions program in Religion. Over time, however, we staged a friendly and successful coup that brought him to the History Department. He has taught just about everything in modern Europe. Additionally, his course on Latin American Civilization was enlivened and enriched by his many years as a missionary in Latin America.

I carved out my niche in what the University of Virginia has characterized as the “Middle Period” in U.S. history, beginning with a course on the Era of the American Revolution and concluding with another on Jacksonian America (Jeffersonian America was sandwiched in between).

Bill, Cline and Mark also team-taught certain courses on a regular basis. For many years, Cline and Mark co-taught what was called “Introduction to the Study of History” (now “Historical Methodology”). Bill and Mark teamed on Renaissance and Reformation. As Mark put it, “Bill taught the Protestant Reformers and I taught paganism.”

Even a cursory examination of the current university catalog will reveal the foundation of courses we built for the major over thirty years ago, is still very much a vital part of the core of the major today.

The arrival of my three colleagues in retrospect is a wonderful testimony of the providential hand of God in the development of Liberty. Only our Lord could have called to a small Baptist liberal arts college within the space of a few years a Virginian with deep roots in the Commonwealth, a missionary from South America, a native of New York City, and one raised on a livestock and grain farm from great plains of South Dakota. The fact that this quartet has worked harmoniously for over three decades, avoiding the often corrosive battles that weaken the strength and vitality of many departments across the nation, is further testimony to his love and grace. Perhaps the writer of Proverbs offers a clue to our long and collegial

friendship. Proverbs 16:23 tells us, “A wise man’s heart guides his mouth, and his lips promote instruction.”

Personal Reflections

This evening, we pay special tribute to three of my colleagues who will be completing their illustrious careers as professors at Liberty University. Therefore, it is appropriate that we take some time to look beyond the formal academic record of what these men taught. We ought to arrive at an appreciation of their larger contributions to the University and to many of us personally. I embark on this reflection as a joyous undertaking on the basis of long acquaintance and deep admiration.

Bill Matheny has, perhaps, the most illustrious family history in our troika. His family name dates back to Gallo-Roman times in the 6th century. In the 13th century, we find Mathenys who served as mayors of Bruges, Belgium. The Mathenys arrived in America in 1664, settling in Virginia at Hope Plantation not far from the future site of what would become Washington’s Mount Vernon. In the 19th century, Bill’s ancestors had migrated to Springfield, Illinois. There, Judge Henry Matheny helped a young Abe Lincoln get his start in law. Judge Matheny also was best man at Lincoln’s marriage to Mary Todd in 1842. All in all, a most impressive family history. Bill was and is a Marine (perhaps those of you who have had him as a professor can appreciate that aspect of his personal background.) Bill served on a destroyer during the Cuban Missile Crisis, certainly one the seminal events in the history of the Cold War. Bill, his wife, Mirle, and family spent seventeen years as missionaries in western South America. Bill, especially in his earliest years at Liberty, drew on that experience to actively mentor students considering the mission field. In that capacity, he showed equal measures of sensitivity to the call young adults felt to the field, and the necessity of imparting a healthy dose of reality as to what life as a missionary was really like. On a personal level, I owe Bill a deep debt of gratitude for tutoring me in Spanish in the early 1980s. This was vital in helping me to negotiate the rather rigorous language requirement for the Ph.D. at the University of Virginia. In noting Bill’s wide range of historical knowledge, my wife probably summed him up best, by calling him “our resident genius.”

Cline has contributed in so many ways to the Department and the University. He was born in Roanoke. His family has deep roots in Botetourt County, and his father was a Southern Baptist pastor. Cline mentions on his posting on the department website that he was drawn to a love of history while an undergraduate at the University of Richmond. That joy has continued during his career as a professor at Liberty. Norma Jean and I recall visiting him one particularly hot summer day many years ago at an archaeological dig at Flowerdew Hundred on the banks of the James below Petersburg where he was spending several weeks of his summer. His enthusiasm for that work of historical discovery was clearly evident. Since the mid-1990s, he and Kenny Rowlette have teamed to produce the annual Civil War Seminar. The range of topics and speakers has been impressive, as has been the interdisciplinary nature of this event. I am glad he

will continue to be closely involved in this important enterprise after his retirement from teaching. Cline also serves on the board of trustees of Liberty's National Civil War Chaplains Museum. Before leaving this subject, I must hasten to add my strong suspicion that Cline is not an entirely Reconstructed Southerner. That said, this Billy Yank has great respect for a truly admirable Johnny Reb. Cline has also been a driving force in the development of a university archive and an oral history project that aims to capture on video and in print the memories and contributions of key individuals in the University's founding and development. Cline and his wife, Beverly, are good friends. Their prayers and encouragement have meant so very much to us, especially in recent years. They have made a vital contribution not only to the University, but to the ministry of Thomas Road Baptist Church.

Our first encounter with Mark Steinhoff was at the bus station on Fifth Street in the heart of the city during the summer of 1977. He had travelled from New York City to Lynchburg for his faculty interview. As you can see, we spared no expense for faculty interviews in those days. Mark shattered all our preconceived notions about brash "New York types." He was and is the kindest and gentlest of persons, self-effacing to a fault. Mark is the sort of person who, if he were hanging by his fingernails over the edge of a deep precipice, and if I were to come along and offer to rescue him, might say something like, "No, I know how busy you are. I don't want to trouble you. I'm quite sure someone will come along soon to help me." Mark, you know that is only a slight exaggeration. While at Liberty, Mark has been a multiple recipient of prestigious NEH summer seminar grants to study in Europe. All of you who are familiar with Phi Alpha Theta will recall that he served as chapter advisor for many, many years. He led numerous trips to sites of historical interest; he opened his home to many social evenings for history students, always exhibiting a caring spirit toward our historians in the making. These evenings of fun and fellowship left warm, lasting memories. Norma Jean and I have had the wonderful experience of Mark's friendship through the years. Our personal times together, phone conversations, and his cards sharing deep spiritual insights have lifted our spirits. We were also privileged to know his mother, Blanche. She was a lovely Christian woman and a dear friend. That same disposition was and is clearly evident in her son. Mark's courageous walk of faith, as he has experienced major health challenges since the late 1990s, has been a shining testimony to all of us, demonstrating what the authentic Christian walk is all about.

Common Denominators

While Bill, Cline, and Mark have left their individual imprint on the life of the Department and each of us, I believe they exhibit certain shared attributes as well. Among them, and in no particular rank order, are the following:

Longevity in service: The four of us (I include myself here) who have taught in the department since the 1970s have something close to 137 years of combined service to the University. That is quite remarkable in a time when attention spans are abbreviated, when people's loyalties to a particular place or job are often short-lived. This pattern of loyalty to place

and mission is quite exceptional. Scripture tells us to honor our fathers and mothers. I don't think it is a stretch of that truth to acknowledge that the same truth applies to the "fathers" who shaped and guided the History Department through its formative years. They built well. Others have come and gone. They have endured.

Model historians: Bill, Cline and Mark have served as models of the historian's craft. Stephen Ambrose recounts how, as an eighteen-year-old sophomore at the University of Wisconsin, he took a course on "Representative Americans" taught by William Hesselstine. The professor's approach immediately caught Ambrose's attention and engaged his imagination. After class, he approached the professor and asked, "How do I do that?" Hesselstine laughed, then said, 'Stick around and I will show you.' That afternoon, I went to the registrar's office and switched my major from premed to history. A half century later I've never wavered. No one can ever master everything, but your interest will never flag." Ambrose went on to say that history is storytelling. "A story. . . can be anything—heroic, sad, funny, triumphant, tragic, good, evil. It is through history that we learn who we are and how we got that way, why and how we changed, why the good prevailed and sometimes did not." Abraham Lincoln, our sixteenth president, and some would say our greatest, said "We cannot escape history," reflecting on the "why" of the Civil War and the devastating losses on both sides of the conflict.

As consummate practitioners of the historical art, I know my three colleagues can identify with these thoughts. Further, I know each of them has profoundly impacted the life trajectory of scores of students who have passed through their classes. They have challenged successive generations of University students to strive for excellence in their studies and in life. that, most certainly, is a lasting legacy.

Perseverance/faithfulness: My colleagues and I share the experience of having persevered. To draw a comparison from our nation's founding, we have shared a Valley Forge experience. Ours, however, seemed to have extended through many winters. The last several years have not been the norm at Liberty. Somehow, our faculty generation is a bit more comfortable, or at least familiar, with scarcity than abundance, though we certainly rejoice in God's abundant provision over the past years. We are not "the summer soldiers or sunshine patriots." We enlisted for the duration.

Those we honor tonight persevered through the years of trial quite simply because they exercised the kind of Bible-based faith that provides encouragement when objective reality would appear to be quite the opposite. Psalm 34:10 tells us, "Those who seek the Lord lack no good thing." James 1:9 states in part, "Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial." I suspect that Bill, Cline, and Mark not only survived but thrived during the lean years and beyond because they rest secure in these and similar truths.

Looking Ahead

I would be remiss, however, if my full attention was devoted to the lives of the department's founders. For the truth is, the Department of History has been reenergized in the 21st century by the addition of new names and new faces. These individuals exhibit a continuing and deep-felt commitment to the teaching of history and to research in a distinctively Christian context. We are more than a little pleased that one of our own students, Donna Donald, is a part of this august company. The expansion of the curriculum to include a graduate degree is a development that pleases us beyond measure. Great days beckon as the Department moves into the second decade of the 21st century.

In conclusion, let me draw our attention back to this "Band of Brothers," this trio of historians (perhaps they will allow me to join to make it a quartet) who we honor tonight. Bill, Cline, Mark – You have my undying gratitude and respect. Each of you is "that friend that sticketh closer than a brother." You have individually and collectively cast a light that will serve as a beacon of excellence for all who teach and study in the Department now and in the future. May God bless you richly.

Thank you very much.