

A.Rufus Tonnelson's recollections about the beginning of Old Dominion University

Sweeney: Could you tell me about your first registration for classes at the new junior college?

Tonelson: Actually, it wasn't known as a junior college. It was the Norfolk Division and it was set up to provide two years of education for students who were graduating from the high schools in the area. As I remember, I took a streetcar from where I lived (I imagine the fare was five cents), came out here, saw a lady in an office and told her I wished to register for the fall term. At that time she made a remark that I was the first student to have contacted her about registration. Since then I understand there were two other students that enrolled with Principal Healy who was at Blair Junior High School, who was also instrumental in forming the Norfolk Division. So, this was my first registration that was held in what was the Old Academic Building.

Sweeney: Could you tell me about the physical conditions under which the students and faculty worked and studied?

Tonelson: In what was later called the Old Academic Building, there were classrooms. The building had been an old elementary school, which had been turned over to the College of William and Mary. I imagine supplies and equipment for the most part could probably be termed inadequate. We had some two hundred students enrolled in the school, but somehow we learned there was a great deal of emphasis on the educational program as such. We had little in the way of grounds facilities. I remember that many times a Physical Education class consisted of running down to the waterfront along Bolling Avenue and then running back. We probably had two showers at best for those who were in the gym classes, so it was not unusual on the hot spring and summer days to have those of us in the Phys. Ed. class just keep on going and plunge in. I guess this may have been the beginning of a swimming team, which followed. Some of the classes were very large. Our History and English classes met in a rather large auditorium that was to the rear of the building. The smaller classes did meet in different rooms. We had a biology lab, as I remember, and a Chemistry lab. There were few spaces that the professors used as offices, but the main office was a small area, and how they managed to keep all the records that they did there, I'll never understand. The library facilities were always inadequate. We had few if any books, and most of the professors who used to commute from Williamsburg would bring with them at the beginning of a semester, twenty five or thirty books that would be placed around the classroom.

Sweeney: What were your main impressions then of the college during the 1930's?

Tonelson: As far as I was concerned it was a college which was giving me the opportunity to go ahead in the field of education. It enabled others also to make beginnings even for two years, in their chosen careers, so we for the most part took advantage of the offerings of the college. I would guess that my main impression was the closeness of the group of students certainly in the early years. It seemed that we would do almost anything to help our fellow students. We studied together, we tutored each other. Again I would point out the closeness we had with our professors, but the main impression, it seemed to me, was the oneness which bound us all together to this Norfolk Division of the College of William and Mary.

Full interview at:

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