

Interview: H. Wescott (Scotty) Cunningham, first President of CNC
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Jane C. Webb

On the 4th of July 1960, I was sitting in my office--Admiral Chandler had decided that perhaps the Dean of Admissions ought to be on board in case someone was in town that day and wanted to be interviewed. I went fishing in the morning and let the assistant dean take it and I came in in the afternoon, and about three Duke Chandler called. He said, "What are you doing?" And I said, "I'm here because you asked me to be here and I'm waiting to see if anybody's coming in," and he said, "Well, there's someone on the switchboard I'd like you to talk with." So I went down. At the Feb. 1960 legislature, two satellite colleges had been created for William and Mary, without names, simply referred to in the Act as College at Petersburg and College at Newport News. W * M had at that time as satellites RPI in Richmond and the Norfolk Division. I went down, and Duke said, "I'd like to ask you if you'd consider something." And he unfolded the fact that he was looking for someone to head the college at Petersburg and the college at Newport News, and he wanted to recommend me to the board for whichever of the two appealed to me in terms of future and certainly present, at that point. AT Richard Bland there was a present, because there was property, there were buildings. AT Newport News, there was nothing. Not a blade of grass, not a paper clip, not an inkling of a piece of property. The promise of support from the local community. RB had already had an appropriation for the year of the biennium from the Legislature. The City of Newport News told William and Mary that they themselves would take care of getting CN started, which meant refurbishing a building they knew we were going to get, the old John Daniel building.

So I looked at both. I asked Duke when he wanted an answer; he said, three days from now. So, I chose to go to Newport News. I liked the looks of what I saw in Newport News in terms of potential growth and the vigor of the community. I have to be totally honest and say it's on the water and I'm a water nut. I saw ever so much to do down there. I saw the population growth was probably going to head, and the other just did not seem to hold out the promise, even though I knew there was a lot less headache getting the whole thing going.

I was surprised at the offer. I had done five years of admissions between WWII and the Korean War, and then I came back in 1958 and I had done 7 more years in Admissions in a very highly selective process where approximately 7000 people applied every year and we had a freshman class of about 750. There is a certain stereotypy in admissions that can be almost like hearing the Anvil Chorus being played over and over. I was ready to go, it was time. I hated to leave a new house here in Williamsburg--it was five years old--that we had built and liked very

much. But I didn't for a minute think we could stay in Williamsburg and operate a college in Newport News. So sell it we did, and moved to Newport News.

We first lived on Shirley Road in Brandon Heights with a lot of people with whom we are still very good friends, and then about a year and a half before we left we moved to Spottswood Lane, near the college, off Shoe Lane, and it was sort of an Eden up there. We were on an acre of property on a private road and we had a field full of ponies across the street.

The first time I walked into the Daniels School--Bob Nelson was the superintendent of schools, and the Daniels School had apparently been old Newport News High School at one point, many years ago. It had been abandoned and had last been an elementary school. I remember Bob Nelson called and said if I went by the school board office, they would give me keys to the Daniel Building and I could go in and take a look at it. So my wife and I went down, and I opened the door and walked in. Well, of course, it was as typical old, old school, with ceilings that looked to me to be forty feet high, and I suspect they were at least thirty feet high, huge central corridor, rooms with wooden floors, great state of disrepair, plaster hanging from the walls, lighting fixtures askew. I walked into a classroom right across the hall, and it had an old, pockmarked green blackboard in in. Scribbled across the board were in yellow chalk was, THEY OUGHT TO BURN THIS PLACE. So that was my introduction to our future home at the John Daniel School.

We got some plans together to get renovation money for library space, class room space, laboratory space, offices, and went out for bid. And the bids came in tremendously high. Duke Chandler and I were down there at the opening of the bids and he said, "What are we going to do?" And I said, "I'm going to go home and draw another set of plans over the weekend." And I did. They were very amateurish but they got all the things accomplished, and Bill Jordan of Jordan and Co. got the bid to refurbish the place, and we refurbished the place for something like \$80,000, that whole four story building. There was a huge auditorium up on the top floor and I remember going up there. The Enterprise was in the Yard at at time and as I stood on that top floor--and it was way up in the air--I was looking straight down at the flight deck.

We worked throughout the year - 1960-61.. The first thing I had to do was right a catalog. Since they had been having some problems over at Petersburg--the man they had selected had backed out - I had to write two catalogs. And then we had to begin to work with the architects in Petersburg and contractors as well as the job in Newport News. We used the people from the state penitentiary a great deal, to do furniture and to do plumbing--the lab hookups and so on--certainly we had to get a faculty and we had to get students. The first person I employed as the Registrar

was Nancy Ramseur, whom I had with me in 1960-61, which was my last year in Williamsburg. . Actually, I kept the title of Dean of Admissions and Student Aid in Williamsburg and also assumed the title of Director of Christopher Newport. I had an office in Williamsburg in the administration building and also an office in the Campus Center which was the CN office. In addition I was able to find a business manager, and we had one secretary in the office. So we began taking applications, and I began interviewing people for faculty positions. Soon we had a faculty of 7 and a student body of over 200.

At the same time, the building in Newport News was coming along. Walls were beginning to stand again, clock systems were being put in, all the necessary accoutrement to put a college in. We were getting library books wherever we can, W & M made some available, RPI and ODU gave us some books. At the end, Joe Biggins who was the city manager of Newport News--a person of almost legendary reput down there-- I found I had 3,4000 left of the money that NN was going to appropriate to us. The agreement had been for construction and furniture. I went back to Joe, and I said, "Joe, I've got \$4000 left, and I want to buy books." He said, "Is that furniture?" And I said, "If that isn't furniture in a college, what is?" So he said, "Go ahead and use it." So we did.

In the meantime, we had to come up with a name for it, and so a number of us got involved in that, Chandler, Lewis McMurren and so on, and finally we felt that Christopher Newport, with all the ties the name had on the Peninsula, seemed to be a very appropriate name for the college to have.

Interestingly, a week before the college was due to open, all the construction work, the refurbishing had been finished, the state inspectors came in. Even though it was a city building, we were going to use it as a state college, so the state inspectors came in. And we went over the whole building, and I thought I was way ahead of the game. We were saying goodbye in the front hall, as they were getting ready to leave, and one of the men representing the state engineers in electricity said to me, "I'm sorry, but I don't think we're going to allow you to open this place up a week from now." And I said, "WHY?" And he said, "Well, I just don't think the power you have coming into this building can handle the load that this building can generate." He and I went back and sat in the physics lab for a while and chatted, and I tried to explain to him that different functions went on at different times and that all the labs weren't going all day long every day, and so on, so finally he said, "Well, if you will promise not to have all the lights and all the lab fixtures going at the same time, I will let you open." I had visions of a year and a half's work going right down the drain, and 200 students being left a week before college with no college.

I can still remember the morning that I stood in that cavernous hall which

reminded me of a place where I had dinner in Germany one time, an old bunker type hall in a castle, and hearing that bell ring at ten to eight on a Thursday morning and having chills go up and down my spine, and all I could think of was, "A College is born." And away we went and we kept right on going from there.

In the meantime we began seeking appropriations to start building on our own. The City had been able to acquire the Shoe Lane tract. We looked at any number of tracts before that one was picked, and there was a condemnation suit, and that took quite a while, too. There were black people living all around it, of course, and they stayed there, and we had a very good, neighborly relationship, I thought.

We saw a site--part of our stipulation was that it be near the INterstate, near transportation from Hampton west to where we were, and also that public transportation be nearby, which it was there and was not at several places we looked. Also, we wanted to be sure the accessibility at night was there, too, because although we started the program at first offering two-year degrees, we envisioned being able to accomplish it totally in the evening, and we were able to do that for a few people.

Jim Windsor came in when I was in the office over at the Campus Center in Williamsburg when we were setting up and he pointed out that he was completing a graduate degree and that he would be so occupied for a year but that he would like to come to Christopher Newport in its second year, and I practically told him on the spot that he was going to be hired and that he would be the dean of students. I had known him at W □ M when he had just gotten out of the Marine Corps at the end of W/WII. He was getting a degree in pastoral psychology, he had had leadership experience in the military, he was a very genuine and sincere person, and he was also a person I thought had ambition and somebody who might be after my job some day. And that was precisely what I was looking for, somebody who was impressive and who knew how to deal with people of college age, although at Christopher Newport college age was all kinds of things in those early days and I suspect still is to a certain extent.

I had no thought then of when I would be leaving, and when at the end of ten years I decided to leave, I had a lot of feelings - all good- about Christopher Newport. I was afraid Christopher Newport and I might be getting too closely identified around town, and the college really needed to be its own man. When I did decide to go, Jim was my nomination for certainly acting president if not president. I had no pressure from anyone to leave--no one had any idea that I was even considering leaving. The faculty never took me to task about not having a doctorate, the board didn't, the legislature certainly didn't. I was asked by my old prep school to help them find a new headmaster, someone who could raise funds too. I started out to help them, and before I knew it they said,

"Would you consider coming up here and spending out your academic career at this level and doing this job for us?" It was a very fine Northern school, well endowed. It paid tremendously more than the state system paid at the time, its benefit package was far superior to anything we had at that time, which fortunately has been rectified at this time.

I did feel that we had gotten off to a very wonderful start. We had built buildings, we had gotten the library to a respectable stage, we had a very good faculty, we had been able even though we were still a two year college to get ourselves into a peer group with Longwood, which then had been a four year college for a time, we had achieved accreditation on our own, we were offering third year courses and had made the break and had gotten permission to offer baccalaureate degrees. At this point I felt my work was finished.

You have to remember that ten years is a little longer than the average college presidency, and those ten years happened to be in the 1960s. And anyone who knows what a college campus was like in the 1960s would know why I was considering leaving. I remember the morning I heard from the three TV networks. They said, "We understand you are going to have a little problem at your campus this morning, and we'd like your permission to come and observe with our cameras, and if you won't give us permission, we're coming anyway."

So we called a meeting of the whole student body and faculty in the new gymnasium, and I remember walking in there with Steve Sanderlin, who was then the Dean. There was a path about two and a half feet wide down the center of the gymnasium. We just walked right down that path. And then I pointed out to the students that I was going to talk to them for an hour and a half about what the board and the faculty and I expected of them, and then the next hour and a half they could talk to me. So we began our odyssey through the two periods. They got down to an hour and fifteen minutes and I began getting fairly ridiculous questions. So I turned to the President of the student body, and I said, Do you think there's any need to continue this? And he said, "Well, no sir, I really don't think so," so I said, "Well, ok, we have a picnic out on the lawn." So we went out and that seemed to defuse them.

I think the problem was that it was Earth Day, and I think they--well, they wanted the usual things. They wanted unlimited class cuts, they wanted student representation on the board of visitors. It was a case of wanting more of a voice. Administrators at that time - in many cases - they either did not like students or they were afraid of students. Too many hid behind the fact that it had been always done that way, to keep antediluvian traditions going. I heard a professor at a major university in Virginia say that once, we do it because we've always done it that way.

I even had the library staff go on strike one time in the 1960s, and we had a long, tearful discussion about an hour after they struck and after that they went back to work. The student body at CN was pretty conservative. They were seeing this going on all over the country, they had seen Kent State, they had seen people being dragged off at protest rallies, and I think it was the thing to do at that point. And I think the Administrators who listened to the students and realized the restlessness that was in them at that point and then sat down and talked to them and gave them a chance to say their piece and then acted out of us own conviction gained the respect of the students and the faculty alike. You just have to put your head down and hit the line - it's the only way to do it.

Of course, we were getting quite a lot of pressure at that point from W & M not to escalate to a four year status, and we met head on with the whole genl assembly, the city councils from NN and H, the supervisors from York County, representatives from congress and a lot of business people. And this was done on a Sunday afternoon with twenty four hours notice. We were told in Williamsburg at a B of V meeting that the Pres of the College and the VPAA would be down the next afternoon to hear any feelings from the citizens of the Peninsula. Well, the citizens of the Peninsula for about two and a half hours really made their feelings well known to those gentlemen who came down. After two and a half hours I thanked them for coming and I very roundly thanked the citizens for coming, and about two months later Mills Godwin, who was then Lt. Gov., came down to dedicate a building--Lewis Webb really kidded me about that building, he said he'd never been to a dedication of a building and not been able to go int he building, and I said, "Lewis, the reason you couldn't go in there was there were about fourteen convicts in there hooking up all kinds of equipment." But Mills made a speech and said there was no doubt that CN ought to become a four year college at the earliest opportunity, and that sort of shot the bolt.

We went in there when there was money around the state. If you were willing to go to Richmond and do your homework, statistic,s population figures and so on, you would get money for buildings. That was the last 6 years of the 1960s. The faculty was excited. There was a youthful vigor to the place. The City of NN was as proud of the place as those who were staffing it were, and I can remember going to the Leg. and getting money for building after building, and saying, "Will you put in roadways for us? Will you put a parking lot here? A parking lot there?" All of which they did.

The exuberance of the whole thing was terrific. I stayed with it until 1970. And I didn't see this happening, but I think now we were on a high. We knew that in 1970 the 4th year would start. None of us knew that the tap of money was going to turn off at that point, 1970 it stopped. I don't think anybody really got any public moneyu for quite a few years afster

that, because really all the beginnings were relatively easy. Of course we had to go out and do battle with all the other college presidents around the state to make sure that our case went before the Leg. but we got all kinds of great help. One thing that has happened - Newport News itself from what I saw after 12 years has had a remarkably difficult time in many ways. On 32nd ST WASHINGTON Ave. was a very busy, active mercantile community, and then going back and finding most of it boarded up. Obviously, something happened to the economy, not only as far as the state was concerned.

This sort of thing can have an erosive force on the people involved in the college. The first blush was over. The place had begun to stabilize. I felt it was capable of going on its own, and then in New Jersey I read about a study that suggested it go out of business. Well, I imagine that was a severe jolt to an awful lot of people who had put in hours and hours of hard work. So I suspect a lot of things got around to that. I remember when they opened TNCC in Hampton. I had suggested to the CC board that we could very easily have appended that institution on to CN just as ODU had with its technical institute, and I remember pointing out to ... Syndor that this had worked at ODU and I thought it would at CN. But it didn't work out that way. AT the time TNCC opened they were getting 90% of their funding out of the tax dollar and we were getting only 40% out of the tax dollar and that hurt. And also we were not admitting everybody who applied for admission, we were turning people down.

That was one of the initial things that boosted CN. Cn was the only college to my knowledge that opened its doors as a member of the College entrance board. I don't think it ever happened anywhere else.

And the whole area has become much more of a metropolitan area. Twenty years ago Hampton Roads was a big gulf. And the tolls - the tolls coming off the tunnel probably had a big effect. It's easy to say what you would have tried to do, but I did leave. Frankly, I would have tried very hard after getting the baccalaureate degree to get graduate work in place. I think that challenges the faculty and it gives the students something to reach for, improves the quality of the course work.

The population figures are going to reverse themselves. It is working its way through the elementary schools and it will get to the high schools. It is the old marketing game - you have to sell it. That's one reason years ago I moved to NN and in the first year and a half I spoke to nearly 300 groups, breakfast, lunches, dinners, and that's the reason when I left I had to resign from 21 boards. I had been through the United Way chairmanship, led the campaign and all that. That's what you need, someone to get out and sell the place. But it has to be made exciting. It can't just be marketed as this is a traditional, fine liberal arts college. While I espouse it strongly, I don't think that sells in the market. It has to be attuned to the

needs of the community. Have to make it exciting. And maybe the college has to turn down a few people. When people find out there's something they can't have, they'll sure go after it.

What do you have that the others don't have? I'm not supposed to be asking questions. But you have to have something different. One thing that got us going very nicely was the Riverside hospital program with the nurses. Good publicity mileage, good faculty. And I gather ODU is moving toward the Peninsula more and more. Whose responsibility is that? Gordon Davies? ODU ambitions and cooperation from a lot of people? This talk about Hampton - the enabling legislation said, College at Newport News. Ralph James - he, Dick Bagley, Charley Hutchens--who was chairman of all the committetes McMurren wasn't chairman of--Hunter Andrews, he was a young senator in those days. They moved as a block, and they were supportive. IF they weren't proud of the place you couldn't tell it.

Lewis McMurren saw CN as something tremendously needed on the Peninsula. HE thought I was moving too fast to try to get it to be a four year college. Then I was under forty, I guess, and I thought there was no tomorrow. I wanted a four year college and I got it, of course. Lewis was tremendously receptive. Lewis was always very patient,