

## NEWSROOM

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### CNC'S FIRST DECADERS AND WHY WE MATTER

**FOUNDER A. JANE CHAMBERS COINED THE NAME 'FIRST DECADERS' BECAUSE IT WAS MUCH SHORTER THAN 'PEOPLE WHO WERE AT CNC IN THE FIRST DECADE.'**

by [A. Jane Chambers](#) | December 5, 2022

*Above: Members of CNC's Classes of 1970, 1971 and 1972.*

*Read time: about 5 min*

### WHO WE ARE

Christopher Newport's First Decaders (FDs) are the students, faculty, staff and administrators who were at CNC in its first decade (1961-71) and/or the early years of its second decade, when CNC was Christopher Newport College of the College of William and Mary.

Anyone who was a student at Christopher Newport then, full-time or part-time, and successfully completed one semester or more, is a CNC First Decader, including Riverside Hospital nursing students, who took required classes with us. Before CNC became a four-year college (1971), it offered the two-year Associate of Arts (AA) degree, but students transferring to William and Mary as juniors were not required to have it, so having the AA degree is also not a requirement for being a CNC First Decader.

Presidents "Scotty" Cunningham and Jim Windsor (both deceased) were First Decaders, as were all others who served our students as

faculty, administrators, or staff in those earliest years. Currently, only two of us whose CNC voyages began in the old Daniel School building on 32nd Street in Newport News are still alive: Barry Wood and I, both of us then in our mid-twenties. Fortunately, however, some faculty from the latter half of the First Decade are still here and usually attend our reunions, including professors Cones, Mazzarella, Gilman, Wood and I, and coaches Royall, Vaughan, and Weinstein.

## WHAT WE DO

Our primary purpose has always been to reunite First Decade students with their classmates, professors, and other CNC people they have not seen or been in contact with for many decades.

We have had annual September reunions for over a decade. First, a two-night celebration at Christopher Newport in 2011, attended by 178 First Decaders plus their guests; next, September picnics at Newport News Park (2012-17), and then, starting in 2018, luncheons on campus. Beginning in 2013, Christopher Newport's Alumni Relations Office has hosted outstanding (and free!) 50th Reunion Celebrations for the classes of 1963 onward, assisted by our lists of names of and contact information for the First Decaders located and documented so far.

We've also contributed memorabilia to help preserve CNC'S early history. During the college's own 50th Reunion year (2011-12), Christopher Newport carpenters built glass-fronted cabinets to display our memorabilia in Tribble Library's rotunda, plus a special display stand for the unique 1962 AA degree diploma owned by Dr. Lois Wright, the first and only graduate of the Class of 1962. Lois's diploma and some other FD memorabilia are now housed in Klich Alumni House. We also have an active website— [www.cncdecaders.com](http://www.cncdecaders.com) -- with articles about individual FDs, campus history, first organizations, original buildings, reunions, our military veterans, current CNU news and much more.

## HOW OUR GROUP BEGAN

The First Decaders group owes its existence to the first book about our university: *Memories of Christopher Newport College: The First Decade, 1961-1971* (Hallmark Publishing, 2008; 256 pages). Created by emeriti professors Lawrence Barron (Barry) Wood, Rita C. Hubbard, and me, *Memories* preserves much of the early history of CNC through 50 short essays by and about over 35 early faculty, staff, students, administrators and more, with 150 photos. It is dedicated to the memory of our first president, H. Westcott Cunningham, and its publication was paid for by the various writers and other supporters.

While working on *Memories*, Barry, Rita and I reconnected with some of our early students, encouraging them to write memory pieces for the book about their experiences in the old Daniel building downtown and/or the new Shoe Lane campus midtown. Knowing who the other first students were was often difficult. While researching in the John Smith Library archives, I discovered serious gaps in major documents. For example, copies of most of the 1960s graduation programs were missing, as were a number of issues of the first student newspaper, *Chris's Crier*. Fortunately, however, the last issue of *Chris's Crier* listed the names of those who had completed the sophomore year—but in shortened form (Was Pat Garrow Patrick? or Patricia?). And since most of the women later married, we didn't know their current last names. Our group's chairman, David Springs, copied all names in the Trident yearbooks into a roster, but the Trident had been published only for eight years, 1964-66 and 1968-72, and did not include pictures and names of all of the students.

Since 2009, looking for First Decaders not yet located has been a *raison d'être* of mine, a task I hope others will continue after I leave this planet. The tab Looking For on our website has photos with names of many people not yet found. Baxter Vendrick's Alumni Relations crew helps us with this ongoing search, especially before each 50th reunion, as do some of the FDs already documented. Locating one person frequently leads to finding another. Almost every newly located FD I've phoned or emailed has been delighted to be contacted after many decades and eager to be reconnected with others already found and documented.



A. Jane Chambers (Photo by Ellen Babb Melvin)



## WHY WE MATTER

Christopher Newport University and the First Decaders have a reciprocal relationship, which began when the university learned our group existed and planned to have a large reunion somewhere.

Since then, CNU has turned to us for help with names and contact information before each 50th reunion. We gave Alumni Relations a copy of our roster several years ago, which we constantly have to update. In turn, CNU shares its latest FD contact information updates with us. The university has also continued providing outstanding 50th reunions for its First Decaders. Mutual back scratching.

A major positive effect of the *Memories* book and the FDs has been CNU's increased interest in the Cunningham family's role in what has become Christopher Newport University. While working on our book, Barry, Rita and I got the Cunninghams involved in it. Bedridden Scotty and their son, Todd, wrote short pieces published in *Memories*, and Scotty's wife (now widow), Cecil Cary Cunningham (Cecy), provided the photograph on the book's Dedication page.

Shortly after Scotty's death on July 24, 2007, Cecy got her important Peninsula area friends together to raise money for an endowed Cunningham scholarship, which then cost \$25,000 to establish. Major donations from Friends of Scotty Cunningham were matched by CNU's Alumni Society. Once publication expenses were paid, profits from sales of our *Memories* book (a little over \$10,000) were added to that scholarship. As of December 31, 2021, gifts to the scholarship from its beginning totaled \$54,610, with a market value of \$105,659.

The existence of the First Decaders played a role in Christopher Newport honoring presidents Cunningham and Windsor. On February 10, 2012, the university held a well attended tribute to Dr. James C. Windsor in the new Gaines Theater in the Freeman Center. President Tribble gave Jim a special plaque and speeches were given by Jim's son, lawyer James L. Windsor, and Jim's close friend Barry Wood. Afterwards, there was a reception and dedication service at the newly named Dr. James C. Windsor Center for Health and Counseling Services. On December 1, 2017, Christopher Newport honored its First Captain (literally, the title Scotty held in the Navy) with a ceremony in the new Christopher Newport Hall, naming the welcome center the H. Westcott Cunningham Welcome Center. Speakers included President Tribble and Cecy Cunningham. Full coverage of both events, including photographs, is on our [website](#), in the Reunions and Events tab.

On April 6, 2016, Mrs. Cunningham, daughter Ann Cunningham Stachura, and her husband, Melvin Stachura, were honored at a dinner hosted by Christopher Newport's Historical Preservation Club, which has FD members including me. The dinner was followed by the family's presentation of all CNC-related memorabilia in its possession, including one of Scotty's dress naval uniforms, now housed in a special display in Klich Alumni House.

## TO JOIN US

If you are a First Decader not yet located: Please contact me at [cncmemories61\\_71@yahoo.com](mailto:cncmemories61_71@yahoo.com) or 757- 817- 8084, or contact FD Chairman Dave Spriggs at [dave.spriggs@cox.net](mailto:dave.spriggs@cox.net). Give your name, phone number, email address and the year(s) you attended CNC. No fees involved.

If you are NOT a FD, but would like website update notices: Contact me or Dave (see above) and state that you want to be a Friend of the First Decaders. No money required.

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*A. Jane Chambers is Professor Emerita of English at Christopher Newport. She retired in 1992 after 29 years of teaching, including five years as chair of the English department. She continues her work as a writer and editor, as well as founder of the First Decaders.*

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