

Tuesday, Nov. 19, 1985

Interview with Lewis A. McMurren, Jr. at his home on Riverside Drive.

Jane Webb

Introduction:

I arrived at the house at 11 on a beautiful, warm and sunny morning. The house, a monument to Colonial taste and craftsmanship, is surrounded by old boxwoods moved from the McMurren family home on Huntington Avenue. A Chesapeake Bay retriever greeted me when I arrived, ushered me to the front porch, and waited to see whether he might sneak in the front door on the guise of accompanying me. Keith McMurren walked up as I was waiting on the porch; Lewis's memory sometimes fails him and the failure embarrasses him. He thought he would be more comfortable in the presence of his brother.

Lewis McMurren was lying on the white linen sofa in his study, waiting for us. He is very frail. He must weigh no more than ninety pounds, and his color is faded and ashen. His eyes are still very bright and round and blue. He does not walk. Despite the warmth of the day, he was wrapped in a lab robe and he wore a sweater vest. He held out his hand and I took it carefully. He knew who I was and why I was there, and he did have certain clear memories which he wanted to share. He could not, however, answer direct questions having to do with factual information. He also retains an old Virginia politician's dislike of speaking unpleasantness. Some of that colors his responses.

The Interview.

I suppose it (Christopher Newport) was my idea. That is, we manipulated the report so that it recommended the establishment of Christopher Newport. You remember the original idea of the group in Norfolk that organized the study that it should all be centered in Norfolk. And we were able to get a wedge in there and we made the most of it. The idea started out to build up ODU, then known as the Norfolk branch. And so we took advantage of that, and the original idea was that the John Daniels School would become a community college. That was before the plan had developed a series of community colleges, and the idea was that we would try to put one over here.

Alvin Chandler was a great help to us and he was the one who insisted that we have 75 acres because of his experience in Norfolk having to try to buy property. In some material that was sent to me it was implied that we were trying to buy property up here to keep the Negroes from expanding but I don't think that was it. I know we had talked about building the Newport News branch at the site of the James River Bridge. That property has since become the YMCA. We had hoped to do that but they decided against it.

Richard Bland and Christopher Newport started at the same time. IF we had not kept behind ours, we would have ended up with something like Richard Bland. We kept behind it and kept moving. Davis Pascall dragged his feet on Richard Bland, and that is why they ended up what they are. Roy Smith and I formed an alliance for the two schools. His school had a start already--Bland--but he was a tremendous help in this and was in a position to help.

I thought up the name. Because I thought that Christopher Newport needed recognition as the true founder of Virginia. I thought that John Smith was good for the library. I thought Christopher Newport was more important because he brought the people back and forth.

I thought that Christopher Newport should be an undergraduate school. I never thought of it was a graduate school. I thought that our students would otherwise have to commute to Williamsburg, and that Christopher Newport would free Williamsburg from being overrun by students from Newport News and damage its place as what William and Mary has developed into. That was the argument we used. I thought William and Mary was a great attraction for the state and it should be preserved that way.

Hunter Andrews was a great friend of mine and of course he played a prominent part in pushing the college ahead despite the fact that it was in Newport News. But he also played a prominent part in establishing Thomas Nelson down there.

I think that the way the college has worked out has been very happy. It has all sort of evolved, you know. I notice references to the downtown campus, and that is what we looked about the John Daniels School as--we thought it should be downtown. But then Alvin thought that we ought to have it closer to Williamsburg than we were thinking and that is the way it developed. Most of the black people who lived along there--where the College now is--a large part of the property was owned by the Johnson family--were very respectable, fine people. Later, I got Mr. Walker appointed to the Board and he was been a very helpful person and a very nice man. The downtown campus idea just disappeared because they thought that the people were going to come from further north. But perhaps we should have stayed downtown, had a campus down there. Perhaps when the highway is completed the downtown location will come back.

One of the things I wanted was some sort of engineering. I have not been too successful in getting that but I hope that it will come. Now that I am ending my career on the State Council, there will not be much more I can do with it, but I think the Council will continue to support it. I was a proponent of the physics degree and I was it was a sort of first step.

Scotty Cunningham did a wonderful job, and he continues to do well. Without his help we would not be where we are, I don't think. I did not know Jim Windsor as well as I knew Scotty. The most difficult person, really, was Davis Pascal. He was afraid we would detract--and Hunter was a great help in overcoming that. Of course ODU's problems in cutting loose from William and Mary and the fighting over that spilled over here. It was a help, because Norfolk then had its own place. But it did not play a great part at the time.

I have read the statement of Marchello (about having a graduate center on the Peninsula). Of course, the concept we had was that Williamsburg would be the center for graduate study in Eastern Virginia, not ODU. ODU has grown so much since then and at the time we did not envisage it in that way.

I am very pleased with the way everything is going at Christopher Newport, and I hope that my recognition will not hurt the school. I will be able to manipulate a little better now. I have been feeling so helpless for the past year and now I am a little better and I will look forward to that. It was so nice--the President and Gordon Gentry and members of the Board came and told me about it. It was their idea, not mine, but I am very pleased.

Conclusion:

The interview ended rather abruptly. Mr. McMurran began to cough--perhaps from the exertion of talking too much. The nurse came in and it was clearly time for me to go. We shook hands, he swinging his legs forward and wiping the tears that had run down out of his eyes from the coughing spell he had suffered. The nurse propped him higher on the couch as Keith and I left. I asked Keith how old he was and Keith said that he had been born in 1914, which makes him 71. His illness has aged him dramatically.