

# Benjamin Hallowell, Dedicated Educator

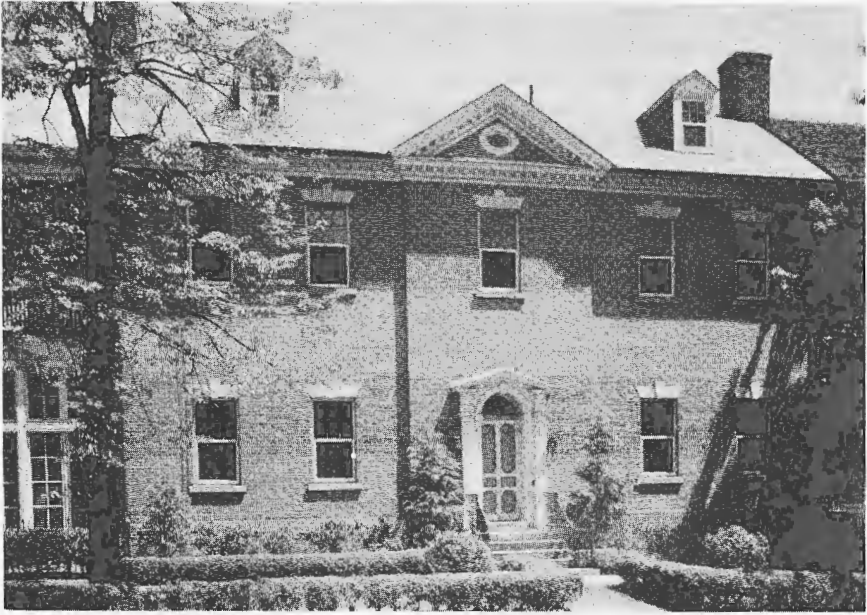
BY ELEANOR LEE TEMPLEMAN

The year that the Arlington Historical Society is celebrating the acquisition of its museum building and permanent domicile, the Hume School, seems an appropriate time to pay homage to the area's first educator of international reputation, Benjamin Hallowell. During the period when both the city of Alexandria and what is now Arlington County were the Virginia portion of the District of Columbia, and extending into the early period of their retrocession to Virginia, Hallowell conducted a school in Alexandria whose enrollment included young men from throughout the United States, Canada, Cuba, and South America.

Benjamin Hallowell was born in 1799, in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, the son of Anthony Hallowell and Jane Shoemaker Hallowell. By birthright, he was a member of the Society of Friends. His father died when he was young, and from the age of two and a half, he was reared at the home of his grandmother, eight miles from Philadelphia, at the corner of Old York Road and Graveyard Lane. Perhaps his success with young people was partially due to his faculty of remembering that there were times when he tried to play hooky from school. In his autobiography, he recalls that at the Friends School which he attended, it was required that the boys wear their hats. One day when spring fishing beckoned, he "lost" his hat. However, his mother said that she could remedy that situation, and immediately started to sew her own bonnet upon his head, with the strap so fastened that he could not "lose" it. Frantically embarrassed, Benjamin begged another chance to find his own, which was successful.

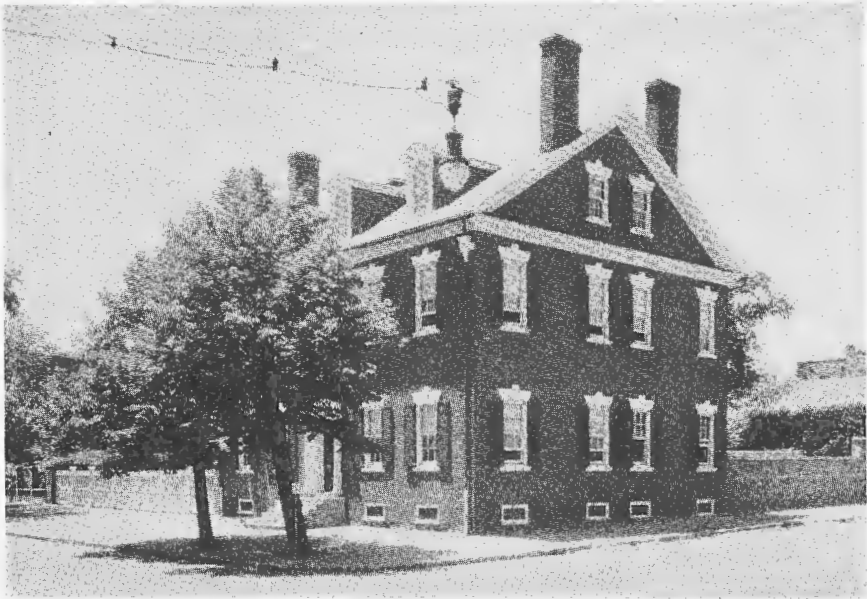
Young Benjamin came to Alexandria in 1824 and opened his first boarding school in a large double brick house at the northeast corner of Washington and Oronoco Streets. This is next to the home which the Fitzhughs had turned over to their cousin, the widowed mother of Robert E. Lee. Benjamin Hallowell has left the following memorandum regarding young Lee:

"Robert E. Lee entered my school in Alexandria, Va., in the winter of 1824-25, to study mathematics, preparatory to his going to West Point. He was a most exemplary student in every respect. He was never behind time at his studies, never failed in a single recitation, was perfectly observant of the rules and regulations of the institution; was gentlemanly, unobtrusive, and respectful in all his deportment to teachers and fellow-students. His specialty was finishing up. He imparted a neatness and finish to everything he undertook. One of the branches of mathematics he studied with me was conic sections, in which some of the diagrams were very complicated. He drew the diagrams on a slate, and although he well knew that the one he was drawing would have to be removed to make room for the next, he drew each one with



HALLOWELL SCHOOL, 609 ORONOCO ST., ALEXANDRIA

HABS PHOTO



LLOYD HOUSE, ALEXANDRIA, VIEW FROM NORTHEAST

HABS PHOTO

as much accuracy and finish, lettering and all, as if it were to be engraved and printed. The same traits he exhibited at my school he carried with him to West Point, where, I have been told, he never received a demerit, and graduated at the head of his class.”

Robert E. Lee entered West Point in 1825, and graduated second (not first, as frequently stated) in his class, in 1829. Two years later, he took as his bride, Mary Ann Randolph Custis who became the heiress of Arlington House. This was their home for the thirty years until the Civil War. Here they shared their children’s tutors with neighbors, and also had their colored servants educated. At the close of the “Conflict”, General Lee dedicated the remainder of his life to the education of young men. Perhaps he remembered and emulated the principles of teaching of his beloved schoolmaster-neighbor in Alexandria. Both these homes on Oronoco Street are beautifully preserved as private residences, and are periodically on open-house tours for worthy causes.

Benjamin Hallowell moved in 1826 to the two and a half story Georgian mansion at 220 North Washington Street, in order to establish his school in larger quarters. This house had been erected in 1793 by James Hooe. However, Hallowell had to seek other quarters in 1832 following the death of Mrs. Hooe and the sale of the property at public auction to John Lloyd whose family resided there for nearly a century. Mrs. Lloyd was the former Harriette Lee, daughter of Edmund Jennings Lee. The Arlington carriage was often parked at its door when the Custis-Lee family attended Christ Church. This handsome residence was recently saved from destruction by Mr. New, who has utilized it as an office building.

Hallowell was perplexed as to where he could find another suitable building for his school, until he realized that he could convert an old tobacco barn and sugar refinery next door into a school. This remodeled edifice was called by the students, “Brimstone Castle”. By this time, the excellence of Hallowell’s “Alexandria Boarding School” had gained a widespread reputation, and its student body included young men from all parts of the western hemisphere. With a large corps of efficient teachers, Mr. Hallowell taught until his health required him to temporarily retire in favor of his nephew and son-in-law. After a few years of rest, he returned to Alexandria and kept the school until a year previous to the Civil War when he finally retired, and was succeeded by Colonel William Kemper and sons of Albemarle County.

It is not surprising that Mr. Hallowell exhausted himself, for aside from the school, he was very active in many civic and cultural achievements. One of his first efforts to benefit Alexandria was to form a benevolent society for the amelioration and abolishment of slavery, although Congress did not grant its petition.

In 1834, he helped organize a Lyceum for the advancement of literary, scientific, and historical interests. He was elected its first President, and de-

livered the first address. The meetings were held in the lecture room of his school, and proved to be very popular. Religion and politics were the only items barred from discussion. The Society purchased a lot at the southwest corner of Washington and Prince Streets and erected a very handsome building in the Greek Revival style. It remains to-day as one of the outstanding buildings of Alexandria, and a onetime home of the Alexandria Library.

It was Hollowell whose influence, energy and ability brought about the establishment of the Alexandria Water Company which was chartered in 1850 by act of the Virginia Legislature. Within fifteen months, water had been brought from Cameron Run to the reservoir on Shooters Hill, and was flowing by gravity into the homes and business establishments of Alexandria. Mr. Hollowell was the President of the Company, and officiated at the ceremony when water was released into the pipes. On March 10, 1874, a memorial tablet to him was placed at the reservoir.

What qualities made this man such an outstanding educator and dedicated citizen? I believe that I have found some of the answers in a letter which he wrote in 1840, which clearly reveal some of the facets of his character. It gives us an insight into his methods of dealing with the problems of discipline.

This letter came from a barrel of old Lee family papers and documents which were stored in the attic of a dependency building at "Peckatone Plantation" in Westmoreland County near Stratford Hall. Peckatone was the home of Hannah Lee, daughter of Thomas Lee who built Stratford Hall in 1725-29. Among her illustrious brothers were Richard Henry and Francis Lightfoot, signers of the Declaration of Independence, and two important diplomats, Arthur and William. Hannah married a distant kinsman, Gawin Corbin. It was through a descendant who rescued the papers before the mansion and its dependencies were destroyed, that this letter bearing on local Northern Virginia history came into the possession of the late C. G. Lee, Jr. His widow is presenting the original letter to the Arlington Historical Society.

The letter explains the disciplining of young William Taliaferro, resulting in his dismissal from school, and is addressed to his uncle, the Honorable John Taliaferro of Washington, under date of June 6, 1840. Obviously, the lad had broken regulations, and a bare statement of this fact would have sufficed. Instead, and in forbearance of an irate letter which he had received, Mr. Hollowell turns wrath away with a gentle reply, and goes into eight pages of details. He shows a very compassionate judgement of the offending lad, a strong sense of justice through his careful evaluation of all the factors involved, and his sincere paternal affection for his charges. After having exhausted every other possible means of preventing further defiance of discipline which threatened the welfare of the school and its students, he resorted to mild corporal punishment as a last resort, and had the courage to justify his action without apology. Perhaps his example could be emulated



ALEXANDRIA LYCEUM  
Courtesy Alexandria Library

to-day with beneficial results!

Herewith is the letter. When you have finished reading it, you will know Benjamin Hallowell, a gentleman and a scholar!

Alexandria Boarding School  
6 mo. 16th 1840

Respected friend,

I am not insensible of the effect the language used in thy note of yesterday, is calculated, or, perhaps, was intended to have; but it has always been a maxim with me, not to permit the haste or indiscretion of others, to draw me from that course which my judgment approves. Waving, therefore, the exception which I might so justly take to the language of thy note, I cheerfully comply with thy request in giving thee a statement of the circumstances which resulted in the unpleasant necessity of dismissing Wm. T. Taliaferro from school in the manner I did.— His conduct was so closely connected with that of two other students, that it is impossible fully to understand the one, without a previous understanding of the other. I will, therefore after a few preliminary observations, present the case as intelligibly as practicable . . . To those who have not been for a long time connected with schools, or with School Discipline, it is more difficult to show the importance of established rules of order, and that, although it may apparently fall hard on some of the Students, it is indispensable to their true interests, and eventually a kindness to them, to be firm in the support of the established order of an Institution. This is a private Institution, consisting of over one hundred Students, between Seventy & Eighty of whom board in my family, and a majority of them are nearly or quite young men. A wise and carefully sustain-

ed system of government, is therefore manifest. To prevent misunderstanding, & as an aid also, my principal rules are published in a Circular, one of which is furnished to every Student before he enters the Institution, and, when practicable, to the parent or guardian also. I send thee a copy. In it is this paragraph: viz: "The following extract from the printed "Rules of Order", to which the Students have constant access, are added for the information of parents or others concerned; and the observance of the order of an Institution being so indispensable to the harmony and best welfare of all connected with it, it is particularly wished that no Student may enter this Institution, who is not *entirely disposed*, to comply, *carefully*, with its regulations." The Students are informed, further, that while I am glad to have them with me when they wish to improve and conduct themselves properly, and am anxious to afford them every facility for promoting their happiness and education, it is yet my *solemn wish and request*, that the very moment they find the rules too strict, or become, in any way, dis-satisfied, that they should feel themselves entirely at liberty to leave the Institution, only to do so *before* breaking the order, that, as we met good friends, we may part so. I tell them, what I fully believe, that under such circumstances, they are bound, by every principle of honour, to comply with its order while they remain members of the Institution; and that while they are at liberty to withdraw at any time, the withdrawal must be *before* a violation of the order. This point it is important to bear in mind, as it constitutes the important base on which my system of Discipline rests.

Some weeks ago, soon after the commencement of the warm weather, Francis Mather, a youth from Texas, quite an interesting one too in many respects, (I mention the names in order that thou may, by inquiring of Wm. Taliaferro or any other of the Students, verify my statements) became frequently remiss in the preparation of his Latin exercises, as did several other members of his class. The Teacher thought it proper, as is our practice in such cases, to have the lesson recited after School, and fixed a time for that purpose. All the class attended but young Mather. On being called on for his reason for not attending, he said he had determined to withdraw from the Institution in preference of submitting to what he considered the disgrace of reciting his exercise during the recess of School. A number of Students considered this brave in him, upheld him in it, and spent most of their time between Schools with him. This proceeding, as would readily be seen by those at all acquainted with Institutions of the kind, produced quite an unfavourable effect. It will be understood there was not a single word of an unpleasant kind passed between us, or a single circumstance but what is here related. The youth had invariably been treated as kindly as if he had been my own child, yet he broke the order in neglecting to prepare his recitations, refused to comply with what was required of him afterwards, left the school in preference, and then, by staying about, and conversing with the Students, produced a very unfavourable effect upon some of them, and of consequence upon the School.

William Waring, son of Henry Waring of Essex County, boy with whom no doubt thou art acquainted, was the first in whom I saw evidences of positive injury. I immediately wrote to his father, informing him that Wm. was not doing as well as he ought to do, especially in application to his studies, and telling him that I would be extremely pleased with his co-operation for William's benefit, and that I would be very glad to see him or hear from him soon, upon the subject. Two weeks or more passed, & I received no reply; but Wm. was by no means improving, and we thought it right to make further efforts for his benefit, and therefore placed him in what we call the fifth class of order, the effect of which, is, to oblige the Students who are in it, to collect on 7th day (Saturday) afternoons. Wm., however, following the example of young Mather, was unwilling to submit to a restriction that had been so recently resisted, and which resistance had received such commendations from some of the Students, mentioned to me that he would withdraw from School. He did so, and boarded for a week at a Hotel in the place, spending a good deal of his time with the Students when they were out of School. Again was an unfavourable effect produced. It was evident this resulted from permitting a Student, *after violating the order*, to choose his own course. I knew this would be the inevitable result, but the reluctance I always feel to resorting to extreme measures, induced me to permit them to withdraw as I did, in preference to compelling them to submit to the Authority of the Institution first, by fulfilling the requisition that had been made upon them. Seeing Wm. Waring remain so long in town after he withdrew from School, I was induced to write to his father again. I related to him all the circumstances, expressed fully my views of the duty of parents in such cases, and again requested to see him or hear from him. In a little time after, he called on me, in company with Wm. He said he fully approved of *all the sentiments which I had expressed in my letter to him*, and of my entire course in regard to Wm., and that Wm. *had done very wrong* in leaving School as he had done. He also desired I might be willing to receive him back again. I told him, after a little reflection, that I felt willing to do what he thought would be best for Wm., only that the order of the School must be observed. He said I was right in that, and that it was his wish for Wm. to remain at School. The matter however was left to Wm's choice, and he chose to go home. I saw here as I had often, tho' not *always*, seen before, what co-operation was to be found in parents for the support of the authority of the teacher, & the Discipline of the School. Here, the parent approved of every part of the course of the Teacher, & disapproved of that of his son, and yet permitted his son to carry out his wrong course, and thereby, as the whole proceeding was known to the Students, give the father's sanction to the conduct of the son in resisting the order of the Institution. Whilst Wm. Waring was boarding at the Hotel, I observed that Wm. Taliaferro was a good deal with him between Schools, and I soon saw that there was a change in his deportment, very much to my surprise, and regret too, for he, had always held a high place in the esteem and respect of us all. One morning in School I noticed

him to be very much out of place, and I took him aside, and, in a most affectionate manner, admonished him to desist from the course he appeared about to take, adverted to his correct standing in the School, the uniform politeness and respect with which he acknowledged I had always treated him, and above all begged of him, if he desired to leave School, to do so honourably before he violated any of the rules, and thereby should break that harmony of feeling that had existed between us from the time he first entered the Institution. I told him further that in case there should be any more attempts to follow the example of Mather and Waring, I should feel myself obliged, in justice to the Students & to myself, to adopt a different course from what I had with them. He admitted the propriety & justice of all I said, and I believe was entirely decided upon acting in conformity with my wishes. He did very well till Wm. Waring's father came, and, as I stated above, apparently sanctioned Wm's proceeding. That very day a marked change was observed in Wm Taliaferro, and the next day in School, without any cause from the student whatever, he commenced striking James Rust, a very orderly Student, he took his book away from him, and then prevented him from obtaining another from his desk. Wm. Taliaferro saw that he was observed by the Teacher, but he continued the same course for some time. We had no doubt his object was that we should place him under some restriction for this, as was our custom in cases of disorder in School, and then that he would withdraw in preference to submitting to the restriction. I was however sensible that a different course must be adopted. I therefore, by questioning the Student whom he had so much molested, & others, ascertained that it was an open, intentional, & unprovoked violation of the order. I called on Wm, then, for an explanation, in hopes there were still some extenuating circumstances that might place his character in a more favourable light; he just smiled with an apparent indifference, and said he had no explanation to give. It was evident something must be done. I well knew if an attempt was made to place any restriction upon him, it must be carried out by force, or else he must be permitted to "withdraw" from School in defiance of its order, and thus be applauded as a brave fellow by his associates, and that this, in all probability, would induce others to follow again in the same track to their hurt. I reflected too, on what he acknowledged, my uniform kindness to him, and my urgent request, just one week before, that he should leave the School *previous* to a violation of its order, which he promised to comply with; I therefore determined to box his ears and dismiss him from School, which I did. My course in this respect, under the circumstances, had & still has the entire approbation of my most deliberate judgement. Justice to the other Students as well as to myself demanded it. The effect upon the School has been strikingly salutary. I had done every thing in my power to induce him to a correct course, which he will tell thee; he *would* not be persuaded to act properly, or leave the School honourably, and he had to abide the consequences. If I had acted in the *same manner* sooner, that is with the other students, it might have been better, but I dislike any thing of the kind most exceedingly, and never resort to it until I



am compelled to. No efforts are spared on my part, as the Students are well aware, to promote their comfort, happiness, and improvement. I ask in return that they conduct themselves like gentlemen. If they will neither do this, nor leave this Institution, I must be permitted to take that course which I believe the best interest of all concerned requires. Such a course I took in the present instance, and although I do most sincerely regret that Wm's conduct was such as to render it necessary, I most confidently believe it was not only *justifiable*, but *called for* by the circumstances.

Thy friend

John Taliaferro

Benjamin Hallowell

P.S. Please to excuse the evidences of the haste with which I have been obliged to write.

B. H.

Even though young Taliaferro may have defied Mr. Hallowell's authority in June, he had been well prepared for entrance into the University of Virginia, with a good academic background, and a strong sense of moral justice. Also preserved is a letter written by him from the University on November 15th which expresses sincere grief over the death of a beloved professor, and outrage over a tragic murder of another University official.

This letter is to his guardian.

To George F. Brown Esq.  
Westmoreland Ct. House, Virginia

University of Va.  
Nov. 15th 1840

My Dear Frederick:

What with the general state of excitement in College and my own sympathy for bereaved families, I can scarcely write a legible hand; just two weeks ago we had to lay cold in the grave our venerated professor Mr. Charles Bonnycastle after a long and lingering illness;—on the night of the 12th two persons in Masquerade were seen on the lawn firing Pistols before the doors of different professors houses threatening if they'd come out to terminate their existence. Hearing these noises Mr. I. A. G. Davis (chairman) came out and seeing a man clad in white standing before his door (or rather after he had come out this man advanced) and Mr. Davis in the honest discharge of his duty as chairman, walked up to him and it is supposed laid hold of him to tare off his mask demand his name; the apparent sound (for it was quite dark) of a short but very short scuffle ensued in which this man disengaged himself from Mr. Davis and retreating a few steps turned suddenly round and with a deliberate and too sure aim fired, immediately when he saw that his shot had effect he turned upon his heels and ran off; Mr. Davis' groans were heard by several students rooming near his office, some of them his own students in the school of Law, they of course ran with all speed to aid the sufferer let him be who he may—and imagine their great chagrin and sore distress at finding their beloved professor lying in the agonies of death!

they carried him into the house and immediately procured Surgical aid, the physicians probed the wound and flattered themselves that it was merely a superficial one, but I regret to say they were mistaken, the ball entered just below the Navel passed through the Rectum and down into the Hip, he died on Saturday following, between the hours of 4 and 5, nearly two days and nights after he was so brutally shot. Suspicion "the green eyed monster" of Shaksphere soon found a victim on whom to rest its unrelaxing clutches—the students called a meeting and appointing committees of Vigilance, all joined in one chorus to ferret out the perpetrator of the dark deed. A warrant was issued against one man who was taken into custody and another who was supposed to know something of the murder absconded; we dispatched committees over the country (having first received a warrant from a magistrate) and succeeded in arresting him, but it is generally supposed to be the former, and he is now confined in goal in Charlottseville, he was tried yesterday and today—but having come to no conclusive point the Court adjourned over 'till tuesday week.

Before this happened I would not have believed that their was such a man amongst us, for it was undoubtedly a student—I look upon this affair in the light of a cold, deliberate, diabolical, and premeditated murder, one which should bring upon the base calumniator the contempt and ignominy of all who know him and his true desserts from the tribunals of his country, for I can think nothing else but that the scoundrel shot Mr. Davis intentionally. My reason for supposing so is partly owing to this—When he came across the Lawn in disguise, after having fired several Pistols *without balls* at different Professor's doors, he and his comrade were going towards the widow — Bonnycastle's when several students (not knowing however who they were) advised them that Professor Davis was on the lookout, at which the one in white disguise immediately rammed something in the muzzle of his Pistol which they all naturally enough concluded was a ball; he then went directly to Mr. Davis' and what followed you have already heard —

I had almost forgotten my main object in writing this letter, but to come at it in a few words and to save time, I will make no preliminary remarks—my object is to call on you for \$75 more which I hope you will see sent to me ere you depart for Mississippi—by the time you can get it to me my board will be due and you know if you leave it with Mr. Bailey although he is very sure yet he is a little slow, and if when I see each man depositing for his expenses I shall not have received a supply I will be thrown into considerable embarrassment consequently I hope you will have it promptly attended to . . . . .

Believe me to be yours truly.

Wm. F. Taliaferro

A pretty considerable fall of snow at the University this morning—Nov. 15th.

Young Taliaferro died in his senior year at the University, on December 15th, 1844. Let us hope that his four years at the University of Virginia were richer and more meaningful, because of the friendship and example of Benjamin Hallowell.