

**James Louis Petigru, the Willington Academy and Their**

**Enduring Lessons for South Carolina**

**Calhoun Lecture Series**

**January 24, 2006**

**Thank you for that warm reception. It is a pleasure for me to be with you this evening, even though I must confess to feeling somewhat of an imposter at this podium. After all, the Calhoun Lecture Series is intended to present “cutting-edge policy conversation by bringing nationally and internationally recognized figures to campus.” Certainly, the list of prior speakers is impressive – I am honored to follow in the footsteps of notables, such as former First Lady Barbara Bush and Coach Bobby Bowden. One suspects that appearing in this series is the only thing that Mrs. Bush, Mr. Bowden and I will ever share in common, but it is a distinction that I shall cherish, nevertheless.**

**Those of you who were hoping to hear something tonight that would rival descriptions of life in the White House or**

**coaching a national championship team may well leave disappointed this evening. On the other hand, neither the former First Lady nor the Coach can help you, or a loved one, get into medical school, so all is not lost. The truth of the matter is that I really do not have much influence on medical school admissions either. Still, you would be hard pressed to sell that argument with the members of our state legislature, each of whom has a favorite candidate for admission. It never ceases to amaze me how many of these young people have turned their lives around after some unfortunate misstep with either the educational or the legal system. Just to clarify, I am referring here to the missteps of the applicants, not those of the legislators.**

**This seems like an appropriate moment for me to make a few comments about President Barker. Not that he would have any personal experience with unfortunate missteps, but rather because he and I are such kindred spirits. We both share a passion for our respective universities and for our**

**beloved state. Of course, President Barker and I do have a few differences. For instance, President Barker was trained as an architect, whereas I was trained as a doctor. You may also have noticed that he possesses a wardrobe that is designed principally around the color orange. In his honor, tonight I am sporting my only orange necktie. The truth of the matter is that I actually had to go out shopping for an orange necktie just to blend in tonight.**

**I could say so much more about President Barker. Since he was so kind to me in his introduction, let me just add that he is both a great friend and colleague. It has been a pleasure and honor to serve alongside him. Accordingly, I would like to dedicate this talk tonight to the spirit of collaboration that has brought our two universities so close together.**

**In my mind, the driving force for that collaboration is our shared desire to build a bright future for the state of South Carolina. Of course, in the great tradition of the Palmetto State, there is only one way to look toward the future, and that**

**is paying homage to our glorious past. So, with your indulgence, I will attempt to look ahead by stepping back in time.**

**First, a disclaimer is in order. It is reasonable to assume that there may be one or two history professors or students in this audience tonight. Surely, nothing could offend a professional historian more than being forced to listen to an amateurish reconstruction of history (please note that the word reconstruction is used advisedly in this context). The fact of the matter is that even a title of amateur historian is unwarranted in my case. Much of what I am about to present was learned solely in the preparation of this lecture. So, my dear friends, even if you learn nothing new tonight, this talk has served a useful purpose in providing an education to me.**

**Let me begin with my favorite quote about our dear state: “South Carolina is too small for a republic and too large for an insane asylum.” I suspect that many of you have heard this quote before, and you may even know that it is almost 150**

**years old. On the other hand, you may not know to whom it is attributed. James Louis Petigru made this famous claim in response to Robert Barnwell Rhett's inquiry about whether Petigru would support South Carolina's secession from the Union. As you can surmise, Petigru was not enamored of secession, a position that isolated him politically from most of his fellow South Carolinians and even most of his family members.**

**At a Calhoun lecture, it may seem a dubious choice for me to lead off with a quote from Petigru. Calhoun, after all, may be viewed as the father of nullification – a doctrine that placed a state's rights above federal authority. Petigru took the opposite position, placing the constitution and federal unification above all else. One might imagine that men of such conflicting political views would harbor considerable personal animosity. We live in a time when political differences are easily translated into personal alienation. It was not always thus. Calhoun and Petigru maintained a personal respect that**

**survived their ideological disagreements. That high regard is demonstrated by the fact that in personal correspondence with his daughter Susan, Petigru referred to Calhoun not by the epithet of the “Great Nullifier” but rather as the “Great Carolinian.”**

**Perhaps the mutual respect between these two statesmen had something to do with their shared backgrounds. They were born just seven years apart – Calhoun in 1782 and Petigru in 1789 – and within a dozen miles of each other in the Upstate. The sons of Scots-Irish fathers, they both studied under the tutelage of Presbyterian Minister Moses Waddel, whom Calhoun later referred to as the “father of classical education in the Upper Country.”**

**Indeed, if one judges a teacher by the achievements of former students, then arguably Waddel was one of, if not the, greatest educator in the history of the South. Among his alumni who served in national office were: 32 members of the U. S. Congress, three Secretaries of State, three Secretaries of**

**War, one Attorney General and one Vice President. He also educated 11 governors and 8 college presidents.**

**During his career, Waddel led several different schools, but his greatest impact, was at the preparatory school that he founded in 1803 in Willington near Abbeville. About 4,000 early nineteenth century boys were educated at the Willington Academy during Waddel's tenure. After careful research, I have concluded that Strom Thurmond was not one of Waddel's students. I am told, however, that he did know some of them personally.**

**The school continued to operate after Waddel departed in 1819 to preside over Franklin College, which later became the University of Georgia. Its golden years, however, were those under Waddel's direction and although it was closed a half century later, the legacy of this school is so profound as to warrant our consideration in discussing the future of our state.**

**In contrast with most other schools of its time, the Willington Academy did not cater exclusively to the children of**

**privilege. In Waddel’s own words: “Our typical boy is from moderate circumstances, a farming background usually. What they all have in common is an overwhelming desire to possess the power of knowledge and the ambition to be leaders of this new republic of ours.” Whether that desire and ambition was born in them or nurtured by Waddel, it is clear that the students were educated with subsequent civic leadership in mind.**

**The curriculum at Willington was intended to prepare students for entry into college. The coursework, therefore, was traditional and focused on oral recitation of the classics of Greek and Latin. As a Presbyterian minister, Waddel also emphasized the moral and religious education of his young charges. Education in the arts and humanities was limited, but the students at Willington did learn to speak French and to play the flute - not at the same time, of course.**

**What distinguished Willington from other secondary schools was not the content of its coursework, but rather the**

**environment in which the school operated. First, each student studied at his own individual pace, based upon his abilities and work ethic. This approach emphasized self-reliance and encouraged a competitive spirit among the boys. Second, a supervised structure of student self-governance was implemented with senior students appointed as monitors and juries. Third, as with most of his contemporaries, Waddel was a strict disciplinarian. Yet, unlike other teachers of the period, he openly demonstrated his personal affection for his pupils, and in return, he won their lifetime devotion.**

**Petigru's regard for his old teacher was evident in the choice of Reverend Waddel to officiate at Petigru's wedding in 1816. Thirty years later, in an address at the University of Georgia, Petigru said of Waddel: "It is not without emotion that I reflect that my venerable master long presided over this institution; and my mind delights to recall him as he was in days long past, the example of a conscientious laborer in the cause of truth and education. The civilization of his age and**

**country may be said, in some degree, to be indebted to him, for he carried the lamp of learning to a distance from the crowded seats of men, and exerted an influence in favor of education that was widely felt. . . Devoted to learning, but still more devoted to virtue – he trained his pupils to place the pride of intellect far below the value of moral responsibility.”**

**In judging the debt that his age and country owed to Waddel, there is no better place to begin than with John C. Calhoun. After graduation from Willington, Calhoun was admitted to Yale as a junior, was elected to Phi Beta Kappa, and graduated in 1804. After completing Law School in Litchfield, Connecticut, he returned to South Carolina, where he was elected to a succession of public offices. During a distinguished lifetime of service to his country, he was Secretary of War, Secretary of State, a Senator and twice a Vice President, first under John Quincy Adams and then under Andrew Jackson.**

**One could devote the remainder of this lecture, and many others to follow it, on the life of John C. Calhoun, without doing him justice. It is with no disrespect, therefore, especially at an eponymous lecture, that I paint his achievements in such a miniature portrait here. Only in that light can one look beyond his long shadow to the much less discussed figures of Waddel, Petigru and the Willington Academy.**

**So, let me turn to another Willington alumnus, James Louis Petigru. His father, William, fought in the Revolutionary War. James was born less than two weeks after Washington took office as President. A variety of financial misadventures led the elder Pettigrew to declare bankruptcy when the boy was eleven. At that point, the family came under the protection of his maternal uncle, Joseph Gibert. With little formal education, limited financial means, and a stutter, Petigru was hardly a prime candidate for preparatory school. Nevertheless, Moses Waddel saw the boy's academic potential and recruited him to Willington.**

**On October 14, 1804, at the age of 15, Petigru enrolled at the school with the following entry into his diary: “This day I am to go to Willington, with joy and fear I view the vast design.” On the anniversary of that date, near the end of his life, he wrote to his daughter: “This day my dear Carey, marks an important epoch in my life . . . 58 years ago I was well received into the school at Willington . . . where a Latin grammar, as a substitute for the plough, was placed in my hands.” It was Waddel’s guidance that changed Petigru’s prospects from those of a poor farmer to a man remembered almost 30 years after his death as: “the greatest private citizen that the South has ever produced” (*attributed to Joseph Daniel Pope, 1891, first dean of the University of South Carolina School of Law*).**

**Following graduation from Willington in 1806, Petigru was extended a rare offer from Waddel to remain at the Academy as an assistant teacher. Instead, Petigru elected to continue his education at the South Carolina College (later to**

**become USC), where he graduated first in his class in 1809. While in college, he worked as a teacher in order to support himself, but still existed on one meal a day. After graduation, with the recommendation of Jonathan Maxcy, the first President of the South Carolina College, Petigru accepted a teaching position in Beaufort.**

**Now, mentioning the South Carolina College to the present audience may not be an especially popular reference, so at the risk of further compounding the offense, let me make an acknowledgment here. USC President Sorensen and the Dean of Libraries there, Dr. Paul Willis, and Henry Fulmer, who oversees the manuscript collection, could not have been more generous in allowing me access to the original documents pertaining to Petigru and the Willington Academy in the South Caroliniana Library. Similar invaluable assistance with historical materials was provided by Gene Waddell at the College of Charleston library. In a very real sense, it has taken an academic village to raise this talk.**

**Now, let's see, when we left Petigru he was pursuing a career in teaching. He served briefly as the President of Beaufort College, but when he was passed over for the permanent position, however, Petigru finalized his decision to leave academics for the legal profession. One is tempted here to speculate on whether being a lawyer or a college president is a worse career choice, but I will leave you to your own judgments.**

**Petigru quickly earned a reputation for defending the local poor and disenfranchised, including whites and both free and enslaved blacks, many of whom otherwise would have gone unrepresented. For his services, he would charge only what his clients could afford to pay, which in many cases was little or nothing. His record of service to the needy later would be memorialized in the naming of the Public Interest Law Society at USC after him.**

**Petigru moved to Charleston in 1819 when James Hamilton invited him to join as a partner in the latter's**

successful law practice. A few years later, Hamilton was elected to the U. S. Congress, where he became known principally for his advocacy of state's rights. Upon Hamilton's recommendation, the South Carolina legislature appointed Petigru to the office of attorney general. He held that office for eight years until his Unionist views cost him political support. Hamilton, on the other hand, was swept into office as Governor that year on the strength of his leadership of the nullification movement.

Unfortunately, Petigru's legal expertise was not matched by his financial acumen. Petigru speculated in cotton, which brought him to near financial ruin when crop prices fell in the depression of 1837. Petigru repaid his debt through earnings from his legal work, which thrived until the Civil War in essence, shut down the private practice of law in Charleston. The crowning achievement of his professional career occurred after he had turned 70 years of age, when the legislature appointed him to codify the laws of the state. That work

**occupied the final two years of his life and was completed just weeks before his death from heart failure on March 9, 1863.**

**The public regard for Petigru was evident by the thousands, both black and white, who came to pay respects as his body lay in state at the Charleston courthouse. On the day of his funeral, the city of Charleston was closed to all commerce. His funeral was attended by the business, legal, and political leaders of the city and the state. Even more remarkable given his opposition to secession, virtually all of the Confederate military officers stationed in Charleston, including their commanding general, were in attendance. A monument later erected by his daughter Caroline gives a fitting tribute to the man:**

**“Future times will hardly know how great a life**

**This simple stone commemorates,**

**The tradition of his Eloquence, his**

**Wisdom and wit may fade;**

**But he lived for ends more durable than fame.**

**His eloquence was the protection of the poor and wronged**

**His learning illuminated the principles of Law-**

**In the admiration of his Peers,**

**In the respect of his People**

**In the affection of his Family,**

**His was the highest place;**

**The just meed**

**Of his kindness and forbearance.**

**His dignity and simplicity**

**His brilliant Genius and his unwearied industry,**

**Unawed by Opinion,**

**Unseduced by Flattery**

**Undismayed by disaster.**

**He confronted Life with antique Courage**

**And Death with Christian Hope.**

**In the great Civil War**

**He withstood his People for his country,**

**But his People did homage to the Man**

**Who held his conscience higher than their praise;  
And his country  
Heaped her honours on the grave of the patriot,  
To whom, living his own righteous self-respect sufficed,  
Alike for Motive and Reward.”**

**What more could be said about a life so well lived?  
Perhaps the fact that a physician is here tonight in praise of a  
lawyer is testimony enough. Nevertheless, at the risk of  
oversimplifying such a complex life, I would like to offer a few  
reflections on the man and his education at Willington that  
may bear some relevance to the future of our state.**

**First and foremost, brilliant careers can arise from  
modest beginnings. Petigru was a poor, clumsy, stuttering,  
backwoods farm boy – few would have recognized the potential  
that lay under his rough exterior. It was the educator in  
Waddel that saw Petigru’s hidden talents and worked so hard  
to cultivate them.**

**The lesson for South Carolina is clear. There is an abundant reservoir of talent within our sons and daughters. Our task as educators is to find and develop that most precious of natural resources. In so doing, however, we will fail if we look only where it is encouraged by family circumstances. Talent, after all, does not distribute itself along the topographic lines of social or economic status. We must pursue a public policy in this state where the abilities of all children are nurtured and supported, without regard to where they live, or who raises them, or what financial resources attend them.**

**The distinctly American construct of education as a pathway to both personal accomplishment and civic leadership could find no better model than Willington Academy. Today, when Willington is only a distant memory, we must look to great universities, such as Clemson, as the heirs to this noble mission. Our graduates must be prepared to build success, not for the narrow pursuit of personal gain, but for the greater enrichment of their communities.**

**It is instructive, in that regard, to listen to Petigru’s own words on the subject. In the previously cited address in which he praised Dr. Waddel, he also suggested the following test of an education: “let him . . . that would show his mind is indeed imbued with the sentiments which a liberal education should inspire, be worthy of the civilization of the age, and seek to extend its benefits. Let a spirit of benevolence govern his aspirations, and reserve his admiration for the benefactors, not the destroyers, of mankind. And in choosing his walk in life, let him so cultivate his mind as if private life was to be his destiny, and accept of promotion or office, as accidents.”**

**Now, the liberal education of Petigru’s day bears little resemblance in content to our modern version. A singular focus on the classics, has given way to a more broadly based study of arts and sciences. From the perspective of the twenty-first century, it is tempting to look back at the study of Homer, Cicero, Horace and Virgil as quaint and outdated. When I**

searched the Clemson website, for example, for the word “Greek” virtually all of the hits related to fraternity life.

While on the internet, I surfed over to the Furman website and learned that, swimming against the tide of educational vogue, they do maintain a Classics Department. One might conclude that Classics is not the most popular major on campus, however, since the Department’s website has a section entitled: “Why Study Classics?” The first reason given is “To Prepare Yourself for the World,” under which the following is written:

“Students interested in professional school – medical school or law school in particular – should remember that their applications will be competing with thousands of others, most of which will look tediously similar. An undergraduate transcript that includes the base prerequisites, and a number of Classics classes, will show you to be an interesting, intelligent student, devoted to learning and unafraid of hard work.”

**For me personally, this statement brought an unusual sense of clarity to the medical school admissions process – basically, we are out to recruit eccentrics, misfits, and iconoclasts. When you think about it, as a profession, we have been remarkably successful at this goal, although in my humble opinion, law schools appear to have outperformed us.**

**Returning to Willington Academy, it is reasonable to conclude that the explanation for its success rested not upon its curriculum *per se*, which was pretty standard fare for the day. What distinguished Willington was the manner in which the education was delivered. Students were self-paced and self-reliant. They learned how to challenge themselves and they developed self-confidence as they met those challenges. Dr. Waddel was there to provide structure and guidance, but within that framework, the boys progressed largely on the basis of their own talents and effort. Surely, these skills served them well later in life, when the challenges were not about**

reciting lines, but rather in confronting the great issues of the day.

The Willington boys also learned the principles of democracy through direct participation. The Academy was not governed as were most of its day, as a professorial monarchy, but rather the boys themselves served as monitors and juries. Again, Dr. Waddel provided oversight, but he entrusted to the boys a remarkable level of self-governance. The boys were taught values, not only in the formalized instruction of religion, but in the conduct of their lives at the Academy. It cannot be a surprise, therefore, that later in life, they were so well prepared to author, apply and interpret the laws of the state and nation.

Just as vital was the chemistry between Dr. Waddel and his students. Great teachers are drawn to the profession by their interest in the students as much as by the subject matter itself. It can be difficult to sustain the focus on students in an academic world that is dominated by the mandate to “publish

**or perish.” Today, the reputations of faculty members, and in turn, the reputations of their universities, are built more on the numbers of grants and papers produced, than on the accomplishments of their alumni. While research universities, such as Clemson and the Medical University, of necessity must emphasize their scientific missions, it should not come at the expense of their educational roles. Both of our institutions have a responsibility to produce great leaders for our state, and we need to guard that purpose as if our futures quite literally depended upon it.**

**These then, are the lessons conceived at Willington Academy that should guide South Carolina for many years to come. The leaders of tomorrow, whether they are heirs to the public service legacy of John C. Calhoun or to the courage and compassion of private citizens such as James L. Petigru, are in our classrooms today. At Clemson University, they are eager to learn and, hopefully, when they graduate, they will be willing to serve. They are men and women from a beautiful**

**bouquet of colors and creeds, selected because of talent and desire, rather than by rank and privilege.**

**What will it take to inspire these young people to a lifetime of service? For each person, no doubt, the motivations are unique and quite personal. Many are called to emulate the examples of role models in their own lives. For me, that niche was filled by my father, who was a public health scientist, but more importantly, was someone of great integrity who loved both learning and teaching. Without question, I began life with the great advantage of having him as an exemplar. Beyond his influence, I had the good fortune of many wonderful teachers who helped to shape my life and values. I suspect that most of this audience could name teachers who played similar roles in their own lives.**

**Even outside of our respective spheres of direct experience we can find sources of inspiration. One of the great joys of studying history is to learn from those who went before us. For any young person, but especially for any young**

**Carolinian, James L. Petigru offers such an instructive example. He overcame personal adversity through education, hard work and perseverance. Petigru offered his professional services to those in need, without regard to social station, and often without regard to pay for those services. He accepted an appointment to public office, not as an end unto itself, but rather as a means toward helping others. Petigru maintained the courage of his personal convictions, even when they isolated him from his family, friends and neighbors.**

**In this, the 200<sup>th</sup> year since his graduation from the great Willington Academy, I commend James L. Petigru to you as a man whose values are timeless and whose example is enduring.**

**Thank you very much.**

## References

**Carson, James Petigru: *Life, Letters and Speeches of James Louis Petigru. The Union Man of South Carolina. With an Introduction by Gaillard Hunt.* Washington: W. H. Lowdermilk and Co., 1920.**

**Grayson, William J: *James Louis Petigru. A Biographical Sketch.* New York: Harper and Brothers, 1866.**

**MacLeod, James Lewis: *The Great Doctor Waddel (pronounced Waddle).* Greenville: Southern Historical Press, 1985.**

**Pease, William H and Pease, Jane J: *James Louis Petigru: Southern Conservative, Southern Dissenter (Studies in the Legal History of the South).* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995.**