

Are You Comfortable in Kirby Hall?

By Nangula Shejvali '06

Walking into Kirby Hall, you may only think of it as a building for instruction. You might view it as a site for a library, or a hot venue for politically oriented brown bags. Yet, when one steps inside what has been described as "a physical realization of Fred Kirby's belief in American Constitutional law and in the capitalist system,"¹ you can't help but question: did the man that conceived this structure have a certain type of student in mind for its use?

In fact, before you even set foot inside this undoubtedly remarkable piece of architecture, you are confronted with the bold statement, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own." Well, surely, would that not depend on what one believes is his own? And if 'mine own' means 'my money' - as many have speculated - then would that not depend on how this money is spent?"

For Mr. Kirby, doing what he would

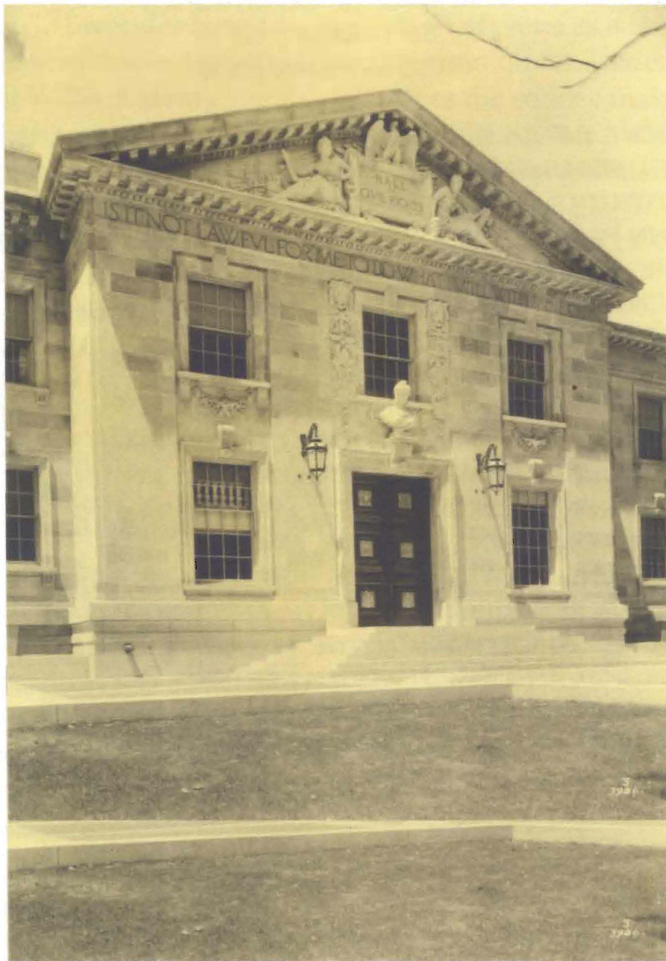
with his own included the building of this particular structure bearing his name. It would serve us well to know exactly what

kind of education was intended with the construction of this building back in 1929. A building, which at the cost of \$590 000, was declared the finest building at the height of the Great Depression². There is no better place to find this answer than on the plaque that graces the lobby, explicitly declaring these intentions (see insert).

Some have called for the removal of this plaque, translating its message to mean that "Rich white Anglo-Saxon Protestant men rule the world and should forever."³ Others have defended its presence even today, saying that its existence should serve as a

symbol on which to "reflect on the struggle of women and minorities, (to) appreciate the progress we've made, and realize there is still much to be done."⁴

But whether we call for its removal or its



Photograph from Special Collections and College Archives Photograph Collection

maintenance, several questions remain: with the college's emphasis on diversity in terms of gender, religion, race, culture, etc, what message does this plaque send to our students? If these continue to be the ideals of the "rich white men", who, by the way, provide plenty to maintain the existence of the school, can we reconcile this stance with those efforts to increase diversity? Several of Lafayette's students of color with whom I have spoken, whether in interviews or on an informal basis, already feel they carry the burden of having to consistently represent their race, culture, religion, and so on. This plaque gives no indication that their efforts, let alone their presence, are welcome.

Granted, this hall of civil rights was constructed in an era where the concept of co-education had not yet taken a foothold at Lafayette. However, thirty years after the pioneer class of women have graduated, nothing in this building indicates that these civil rights should extend to women. Furthermore, we are left to wonder whether these rights apply to people of color or of diverse religions. Unless of course the God mentioned in this plaque refers to the gods

of all nations and peoples, which the language in the plaque does little to suggest.

Kirby Hall was erected at a time when imperialism and colonization were eminent. Clearly, it's sponsor did not imagine that eighty years down the line, an African student, descendent of men and women who were being exploited by those who felt it

lawful to do what they might with their own, in Africa or elsewhere, would be sitting in these halls. Considering the level of comfort that students of color, international students, women, homosexuals, and other people of diverse backgrounds might feel upon entering these halls, leads to another question: what is up with the portraits? As a black African woman, I've

somehow learnt to ignore the faces of these old white men staring down on me as I grace Kirby Hall's passages with my presence. Yet, I always wonder what these men might think, would they see me now. How receptive of my presence would they be? Would the stern looks on their faces turn to anger when they saw their money was going to further my education, and not to "perfecting (their) own life and liberty?" Or would they welcome me with open arms?

THIS HALL OF CIVIL RIGHTS
IS THE GIFT OF
FRED MORGAN KIRBY

TO PROVIDE FACILITIES FOR INSTRUCTION IN "THE ANGLO-SAXON IDEALS OF THE TRUE PRINCIPLES OF CONSTITUTIONAL FREEDOM INCLUDING THE RIGHT OF MAN TO OWN PROPERTY AND DO WITH IT AS HE WILL, THE RIGHT TO LIFE, LIBERTY, AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS, AND INCIDENTALLY THE RIGHT TO SELL HIS LABOR AS HE CHOOSES, AND TO ENJOY THE FRUITS THEREOF WITHOUT MOLESTATION OR UNDUE RESTRAINT, AND THE STUDY OF THE ATTAINMENT OF THESE RIGHTS AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF THESE IDEALS IN THE HISTORY OF THE HUMAN RACE, AND TO ENCOURAGE INDIVIDUAL INITIATIVE AND ATTAINMENT AMONG YOUNG MEN, TO ASSIST IN THE TRAINING OF LEADERS FOR TRADE, INDUSTRY, FINANCE AND ENGINEERING, AS WELL AS FOR POSITIONS OF PUBLIC INFLUENCE IN CHURCH AND STATE, AND TO COMBAT DOCTRINES WHICH MINIMIZE THE IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP, AND WHICH WOULD RESTRICT THE INDIVIDUAL FROM USING ALL HIS POWERS TO THE FULL GLORY OF GOD, THE SERVICE OF HIS FELLOWMEN, AND THE PERFECTING OF HIS OWN LIFE AND LIBERTY".

In questioning who these men are in the first place, I look to a description provided in a 1952 *Alumnus Quarterly*. This describes the collection of portraits as "a study in the varieties of the American national character or moral genius in its statesmen, generals, Indian fighters, judges, diplomats, pamphleteers, song writers."⁵ It goes on to say that, "These men are the American folk-heroes: in these extraordinary faces is the visual history of the national inspiration". I wonder how a student of Native American descent might feel when the image of William Henry Harrison - an Indian fighter⁶ - is romanticized by the school, through its presence in her classroom?

Of course, many of the men in these portraits were emancipators (though some owned their own slaves), but how many of them envisaged white students sitting with their black peers in a classroom setting? Despite the fact that many of these men were presidents and had the power to make things happen, full integration did not occur until 1954. The declaration that all men are created equal seems not to have been fully grasped by those that defended this same declaration.

In reference to the plaque, Roth and Adekanmbi (both class of '04), questioned, "At an institution that trumpets so loudly its push for diversity and its willingness for change, why leave up a testament to the glory of rich white men?"⁷ Indeed, such elements in academic buildings contradict Lafayette's vision of a diversified

body. How committed is Lafayette College to making all students feel at home, when a small population of these students have to confront a building, a plaque, portraits and other symbols that constantly make them feel unwelcome? What steps are being taken to let these students know that their presence on this campus is important to the college? How do we reconcile the ideals evoked by this building, with the ideals that the school portrays? In depicting Lafayette as a college with a "national reputation for academic excellence,"⁸ how does the college make students feel proud in claiming this excellence, when their learning environment is tainted with such images?

¹ Mattison, Robert. 1991. Lafayette College Architecture: In Context. Friends of Skillman Library, Easton, PA.

² New York Times, Friday, May 30, 1930

³ Adekanmbi, Omoliyi & Roth, Amanda. May, 2004. Lafayette College Newspaper.

⁴ Glasser, David. May, 2004. Lafayette College Newspaper.

⁵ Rousuck, E.J. 1952. The Lafayette Alumnus (Reprint from the May 1952 issue.)

⁶ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/history/presidents/wh9.html>

⁷ Adekanmbi, Omoliyi & Roth, Amanda. May, 2004. Lafayette College Newspaper.

⁸ Lafayette College Website. <http://www.lafayette.edu>

