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The Amos Alonzo Stagg Society and the Struggle Against Athletic Expansion at the College of William and Mary

Intercollegiate football has been a part of the campus life at the College of William and Mary-the second oldest college in date of founding in the United States-since the nineteenth century. For a period in the twentieth century, William and Mary was a part of the old Southern Conference and fielded teams that played universities that are now part of the Southeastern and Atlantic Coast Conferences. In the early 1950s William and Mary downsized its football program. At that time, a nationally publicized scandal caused the resignation of the college's scholarly president (who was widely viewed as the scapegoat) and of principal members of the athletic department. Investigators discovered that William and Mary's coaches routinely had been changing the high-school transcripts of prospective football recruits.

In the early 1980s, when Virginia elected a governor who had been a student at William and Mary while it was a minor athletic power, the prospect of big-time football in Williamsburg re-emerged. Governor John Dalton, a Republican from the Shenandoah Valley, brought a concern for big-time football with him into the governorship. Because of recent NCAA changes, William and Mary was then playing Division II football, and Dalton was determined that his *alma mater* would be nationally known on the gridiron again. Dalton appointed to the William and Mary Board of Visitors new members who shared his concern for bringing Division I football to William and Mary. However, there was one major rub. To qualify for Division I football, William and Mary would have to double the size of its football stadium.

In the years since the football scandal of the 1950s William and Mary had changed from a partially academic, partially social school to an institution with the highest SAT and admission standards in Virginia. When the faculty and students learned of the new plans of the Board, they responded with mass meetings, protest leaflets, letter writing campaigns, and picketing at football games. Behind most of these responses was the newly formed Amos Alonzo Stagg Society, which sought to keep William and Mary as amateur as possible in football. The Stagg Society also hired an attorney to challenge the Board's plans in court. The controversy lasted for two years, spilled over into the state and national newspapers, and prompted Governor Dalton to come to Williamsburg to dine with the Board of Visitors—something longtime observers of Virginia politics failed to recall happening previously. Dalton's own daughter participated in the protests at William and Mary, and when directed by her father to stop protesting, reacted by temporarily breaking off relations with him. Two student referenda held on the proposal to enlarge the football program indicated that over ninety percent of the William and Mary students opposed the plans. The second referendum, held a year after the first, demonstrated that the opposition among students had only increased in the interim.

Ultimately, the Board of Visitors dropped its plans. The economic slowdown of the first years of the 1980s may have had more to do with the change than the opposition of students, faculty, alumni, and townspeople. But the work of the Amos Alonzo Stagg Society in keeping the spotlight on the Board's plans and in publishing embarrassing statistics and financial statements played a substantial role. The episode showed that it is possible for aroused faculty, students, and alumni—if they are willing to hang in there for the duration—to outlast the ruling body of an institution and prevent the enlargement of unnecessary and unwanted athletic programs.

The aftermath of the stadium controversy at William and Mary proved to be ironic. In the same year, the University of Virginia expanded both its stadium and its football program, but whatever protests this inspired were brief and small. The University of Virginia went on to pour massive amounts of money into recruitment and facilities. Its admission standards came to permit applicants who had scored 900 on their SATs to be admitted. But in the years between the early 1980s and today, the University of Virginia became the premier state undergraduate institution, replacing William and Mary. Football at William and Mary remained far more in the tradition of amateur athletics and the

football team at William and Mary had SATs in the 1100s. Ironically the institution that embraced big-time football came to surpass the one that took a stand on academic principle. Relatively few Virginians seemed to care.

Son of a college coach and athletic director, the presenter of the paper founded the Amos Alonzo Stagg Society and participated in all of the protests. This paper is based upon the archives of the Society, which are in his possession. The presenter still believes in the principles of amateur athletics and high academic standards on which the Society was founded—and thinks that the experience of a small college opposing big-time athletics will interest his fellow sports historians.