

Talk given at the S.A.R. meeting by Gustavo Pellón, Professor of Spanish and Comparative Literature, University of Virginia on Saturday October 7, 2017.

Thomas Jefferson, Simón and Fernando Bolívar¹

Fernando Bolívar (1810-1898), nephew and adopted son of Simon Bolívar, left Venezuela in 1822 to pursue an education and to escape the turmoil of the war of independence in which his own father had died. He attended Germantown Academy in Germantown, Pennsylvania, and studied there for five years. Upon completion of his studies in Germantown Academy, he thought of going to West Point but chose the University of Virginia because “it had been instituted by that eminent patrician [Thomas Jefferson] in the town of Charlottesville and at a short distance from his country residence” [Knudson 31]. Fernando Bolívar looked forward to meeting Thomas Jefferson, who though “rather ancient, nevertheless took an interest in establishing that free educational institution [where] the buildings were most beautiful and well disposed” [Knudson 31].

Fernando’s letter of application to the University of Virginia “reached Jefferson, who was very much delighted over the prospect of meeting the nephew and adopted son of such an eminent figure as Simón Bolívar, the ‘Washington of South America’” [Shirley 2]. Unfortunately, Jefferson died on July 4, 1826, and young Bolívar did not register at the University until March of 1827, by the way only a few months after Edgar Allan Poe had left. In a 1929 article about Fernando Bolívar Elizabeth Randolph Shirley observed:

Jefferson would, no doubt, have given the young South American a most cordial welcome, for his interest in the cause of the emancipation of South America had been awakened even before Simón Bolívar won the title of Liberator. It was while Jefferson was President and apparently with his tacit consent, that General Miranda, in 1806, fitted out an expedition in New York and, accompanied by about 60 sailors, soldiers, and officers, citizens of the United States, made an heroic and ill-fated landing on the Venezuelan coast. An imposing column erected to the memory of these men in Puerto Cabello commemorates the little-known fact that soldiers of liberty from the United States were among the very first to shed their blood in the cause of the independence of Venezuela. . . A sort of spiritual kinship seemed to exist in those days between all who had labored in the cause of freedom, and many of the patriots of the Northern Republic were moved by the greatest sympathy to pay the hero and liberator of

¹ A version of this talk given by Gustavo Pellón, Professor of Spanish on Founder's Day April 13, 2002 at the presentation of the Bolívar family papers and silver by Luis Fernando Bolívar, direct descendant of Fernando Bolívar.

the south a homage equal to that which they owed to the “Father of His Country.” [Shirley 2, 10]

Simón Bolívar had hoped that his nephew would attend West Point, but acquiesced to Fernando’s decision because he too was a fervent admirer of Thomas Jefferson. Simón Bolívar sent a letter of detailed instructions to the faculty of the University, outlining how he wanted his adopted son educated.²

General Bolívar’s letter began: “The education of children ought to be always adequate to their age, inclinations, nature, and temperament.” The subjects Bolívar listed for Fernando’s education were: modern languages, “without neglecting his own. Dead languages should be studied after learning the living ones.” geography and cosmography, first contemporary and then ancient history, the sciences (because “they teach us the analysis of everything, passing from the known to the unknown, and by this means we learn to think and to reason with logic”), calculus, geometry, statistics, civil engineering, (“but not against his will, if he is not inclined to these studies”) and the rudiments of linear drawing, astronomy, chemistry and botany. “It is not necessary that he learn music, unless he has a passion for that art,” Bolívar noted, but “the moral values of religious maxims and the practical conservation of health and life, is a study that no teacher should neglect.” The Liberator added, “The teaching of good customs or social habits is as essential as formal education; therefore, special care should be taken that he learn the principles and manners of a gentleman from the letters of Lord Chesterfield to his son, which contained “the principles and manners of a gentleman.” Bolívar closed his letter of instructions to the faculty of the University of Virginia but stressing that Fernando should study Roman law, “as the base of universal legislation.” [Knudson 32-33]

In his memoirs entitled *Recuerdos y Reminiscencias* published under the anagramatic pseudonym “Rivolba” in Paris in 1873, Fernando speaks admiringly of the Mr. Jefferson’s university and the freedom and the special opportunities enjoyed by the students. He recalled, among other things, that he “learned fencing and French at the same time from a former French military officer.” [Knudson 33]

Fernando Bolívar's stay at the University was to be as brief as that of his contemporary Edgar Allan Poe. Fernando "was still in his first year at the University when the commercial house that had been handling his funds suddenly went bankrupt. James Monroe, then director of the University, offered to let the distinguished visitor live in the little brick

² Translation from *Virginia Cavalcade* article, Autumn 1961, typescript copy of Spanish original in Alderman Library. I made corrections and added parts that had not been translated.

cottage behind his law office,³ but Fernando sadly decided he must return to his own country." [Knudson 34]

Before returning to Venezuela Fernando had dinner with President John Quincy Adams. "He also met Secretary of State Henry Clay, the champion of Latin American independence and a warm supporter of the emerging countries to the south." [Knudson 34]

Putting to good use the education he had pursued in the United States, Fernando served as secretary of Simón Bolívar until the Liberator's death December 17, 1830. Fernando served his country in the military, in government and as a diplomat dying in Caracas in 1898.

Portraits of Fernando and Simón Bolívar were presented to the University on Founder's Day April 13, 1944 by the Venezuelan ambassador, Dr. Diógenes Escalante, on behalf of President Isaías Medina. The portraits used to hang in the Romance Language Pavilion [VI] on the East Lawn.

This wonderful story lay dormant for many years. The portraits which were stored in the Cabell Hall offices of the Department of Spanish, Italian and Portuguese for many years were the catalyst for its rediscovery. In 1990, when I was director of the Latin American Studies Program, I was interviewed by Bob Brickhouse and mentioned the existence of the portraits. Mr. Brickhouse became interested in the story and promised to do some research. It was Mr. Brickhouse who located the previously published 1929, 1944, and 1961 articles which are the sources for much of the story I have recounted here. The story has also appeared in a major Latin American novel. In *The General in His Labyrinth*, (1989) a novel about Simón Bolívar's last days, Gabriel García Márquez (the Colombian Nobel laureate) mentioned Fernando's education at the University of Virginia.

After leading a nomadic existence for some years, the portraits hung appropriately at the Casa Bolívar the University's Spanish language residence, named after Fernando, undoubtedly our first Latin American alumnus. The Venezuelan ambassador was present at the dedication of the Casa Bolívar in 1997. For security reasons the portraits are now displayed at the Faculty Lounge of the Department of Spanish, Italian and Portuguese, New Cabell Hall 456.

When Pablo Davis started his tenure as Dean of Students, I told him the story and passed on the materials. Being a historian Mr. Davis appreciated the importance of these almost forgotten Virginia traditions. When Mr. Davis led the movement to organize Virginia's Latino alumni it was named the Bolívar Network in honor of Fernando.

³ In what is now Monroe Hill on the Grounds.

Works Cited

Jerry W. Knudson. "A Venezuelan in Virginia," *Virginia Cavalcade*.
Autumn 1961.

Elizabeth Randolph Shirley. "Fernando Bolivar and the University of
Virginia," December 1929 issue of the *Bulletin of the Pan American
Union*.