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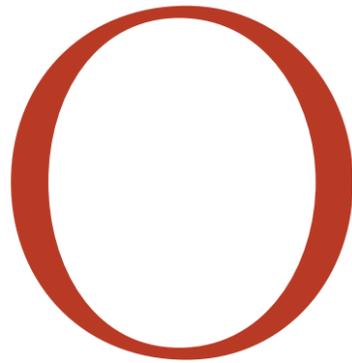
In 1960, Divinity School student James Lawson was asked to withdraw from Vanderbilt.

He chose not to do so.

DAYS of THUNDER

His decision changed the way insiders and the nation viewed the University.

The Lawson Affair



ON MARCH 21, 1960, THE DIVINITY SCHOOL dedicated its new building complex and chapel. It was eagerly awaited. The school had been part of Vanderbilt from the beginning, nearly a century before, surviving church squabbles, economic hard times, damage by fire. The new quadrangle was to be a tribute to the school's growing national reputation. It was to be a permanent symbol of progressive Christian spirituality in the conservative Protestant South.

On dedication day, however, things were not well. Festivities were subverted by a lengthening shadow of conflict. A nightmarish controversy over racial justice, civil disobedience and University power was fast getting national attention. Despite the new building, the future of the Divinity School was in jeopardy. Crisis was nigh. Within weeks, most of the 16 divinity professors would submit resignations, with other University faculty poised to follow. Administrative leaders would soon threaten to shut down the Divinity School altogether and, if need be, hand the newly dedicated building over to the Law School.

The turmoil of the Lawson affair, as it was called, would engulf the campus before it was over. The conflict sprang from the expulsion of a divinity student, James Lawson, for his off-campus leadership in Nashville's fledgling civil rights movement. The controversy pitted Divinity's pro-Lawson supporters against Chancellor Harvie Branscomb and the Vanderbilt Board of Trust. Despite all efforts, University officers were seeing a fast-spreading public relations meltdown that might sabotage Vanderbilt's dreams of national standing and repute.

"It was not possible to build a major university with this problem," recalls Charles Roos, retired professor of physics who became a key negotiator in resolving the Lawson affair. "This thing just had to be settled."

In the spring of 1960, the Lawson crisis would test Vanderbilt's self-identity to new limits. The ordeal threatened to set Vanderbilt back by years as a national research institution. Top-notch faculty were ready to leave the University over it, and major foundation funding would likely disappear with them. As it turned out, the Lawson episode was a soul-searching referendum on what the University wanted to be—either a major center of learning or, as critics put it, a "southern finishing school." It was a showdown of clashing values—Vanderbilt's reach for national status versus sectional traditionalism and fear of change. In the minds of many, it was the most critical moment in the history of Vanderbilt University.

"It was a defining event, and still is," says Eugene TeSelle, retired professor of church history at the Divinity School. "In a sense Vanderbilt was lucky to have had this crisis at this period in history—the University



GERALD HOLLY, COURTESY OF THE TENNESSEAN

learned how to deal with conflict—and it was lucky to have weathered it."

A new book, a history of the Divinity School called *Vanderbilt Divinity School: Education, Contest, and Change*, revisits the episode, offering fresh perspectives and the clarity of 40 years' hindsight. The book's Lawson chapter is a transcript of a 1998 roundtable discussion that included various participants from those days. They include Charles Roos and James Lawson himself, now a retired Methodist minister in Los Angeles after a long career in parish ministry and social advocacy. Edited by church historian Dale Johnson of the Divinity School, the book will stand as one of the crucial sources for understanding that era of campus history. Along with Paul Conkin's book *Gone with the Ivy: A Biogra-*

phy of Vanderbilt University, it is used for the narrative to follow.

"When it is a conflict like the one in 1960," Lawson, now past 70, recalls in *Vanderbilt Divinity School*, "where we had the city on one side, a determined movement on the other side, and the University, that has explosive qualities that none of us could have predicted or understood. So it was trial by experiment, by error, for all of us."

The Lawson controversy involved epic negotiations and miscalculations, contested facts, seat-of-the-pants judgment calls, careers put at risk, political naiveté and personal torment. What began as a personnel matter—the expulsion of Lawson—blew up into a national fracas, the result of defensiveness and distrust in a time of rapid social change that

The expulsion of James Lawson from the Divinity School sparked national debate. On the Vanderbilt campus, students protested outside Kirkland Hall in support of Lawson.

no one had an easy time grasping.

Through exasperated effort and courage, the thing was settled by mid-June 1960. Repercussions were felt on campus for years and still leave their mark. And it has led to endless debate ever since about the legacy and character of Chancellor Harvie Branscomb, who had Lawson expelled in the first place. Ironically, it was Branscomb who led Vanderbilt into racial integration (one of its schools, that is) in 1952, but he was blamed for the racially charged Lawson episode eight years later.

"One of the things I have reflected upon is that I feel very strongly that Harvie

Branscomb made a major error in his life," Lawson says. "He obviously did not have enough people around him to help him get through in a fashion that could have reduced the tension in the University. My own major reflection as I look back upon it is that we have to accept the man as he was, as we have to accept ourselves, because in the situation we get, we all make errors."

From the University's viewpoint, James Lawson in 1960 was sabotaging Branscomb's careful plan of easing the broader University into a new world of racial equality. The Lawson episode, coming when it did, forced an unwelcome revolution of thought and action.

"Until 1960, Chancellor Branscomb successfully, but not without difficulty, walked a tightrope over the volatile passions of a racial revolution in the making," Conkin writes in *Gone with the Ivy*.

"But all political maneuvering ran aground in 1960 in the complicated case of one James Lawson, the most divisive episode in all of Vanderbilt's history."

James Lawson was a 30-year-old transfer

King, who urged him to come South in the struggle for justice for black Americans.

Impressed with Vanderbilt and with the cadre of educated African American students in the local black colleges, Lawson came to Nashville as staff organizer for the peace-oriented Fellowship of Reconciliation, as well as a divinity student.

January 1960 was the last moment the bubble of southern segregation could still appear complacently safe and sound in Nashville. Segregation was being tested or struck down elsewhere. The year 1954 was the beginning of the end, when racial separatism was legally discredited by the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision against a segregated education system. Desegregation of Nashville schools was slowly under way, with gusts of resistance and even violence along the way.

But social segregation of black and white continued—restaurants, movie theaters, restrooms, taxi cabs, every nook of public life. In Nashville in early February 1960, this age-old pattern was challenged in a new way, by a revolutionary but untested paradigm

draw on higher laws of faith and civilization, the power of biblical righteousness, hoping to shame the merchants into seeing the immorality of their practices against fellow human beings.

The sit-ins reached an early peak at the end of February 1960. Scores of black students (and some white students) were taking part. Hostilities edged toward confrontations with angry whites who surrounded the sit-in students at the downtown lunch spots. Lawson was portrayed in the local newspapers as an outspoken leader of the new movement, an outsider who defied local authorities in the name of divine laws of justice and dignity for black Americans.

On Feb. 27, 1960, the young demonstrators were rounded up and arrested by the dozens, charged with disorderly conduct or loitering. Lawson denounced these as trumped-up misdemeanors, legal "gimmicks," he said, for shutting down the protests and legitimating injustice. He urged demonstrators to continue the sit-ins. Thus Lawson urged defiance of local laws.



COURTESY OF THE TENNESSEAN

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student from Oberlin School of Theology in Ohio when he entered the Vanderbilt University Divinity School in 1958. He was an intellectual, a well-traveled Methodist minister and an African American. He brought other uncustomary credentials: He was an Ohio Yankee, and a pacifist.

Lawson's passion was social justice. He had gone to jail as a conscientious objector during the Korean War. Then, as a missionary abroad, he had studied philosophies of non-violence in India, the homeland of Gandhi. He returned to Ohio, eager to apply activist strategies to the American scene. At Oberlin he met Martin Luther King Jr., whose prestige as civil rights prophet was nearing its height. Lawson's experiences fascinated

and moral calculus—non-violent civil disobedience and direct action. James Lawson was instrumental in bringing it to town.

Black students staged sit-ins at Nashville's downtown department store lunch counters, which did not admit blacks. The young protesters had been trained for weeks in non-violent strategies of civil disobedience—trained to take verbal and physical abuse and arrest without fighting back—in order to challenge unjust or immoral social practices.

Lawson, planning to graduate from Divinity School in May 1960, trained students for the sit-ins. He wasn't interested in testing the constitutionality of current laws by taking a grievance through a skein of ponderous court decisions. He and others wanted instead to

Timing proved fateful. Media publicity about Lawson's off-campus activities erupted at the same time the executive committee of Vanderbilt's Board of Trust was meeting in early March 1960. Alarmed that Lawson was on record flouting the law, Branscomb pressed for clarification of the views of this troublemaking student. He knew the conservative-minded Board of Trust would be upset, too. Through the dean of the Divinity School, Robert Nelson, Lawson provided a statement of his beliefs and strategies. But Branscomb didn't get what he wanted—a strong assurance that Lawson would obey the laws of the land.

So Branscomb declared Lawson should drop out of school or be kicked out and,

meeting March 3, the executive committee of the Board of Trust agreed.

The book *Vanderbilt Divinity School* notes, "At this meeting the executive committee determined that Lawson would be given until 9 a.m. the next day to decide whether to withdraw from the University or be expelled."

Lawson refused to quit, so he was expelled the next day. This pleased powerful board member James Stahlman, publisher of the *Nashville Banner*, which was editorializing stoutly against Lawson's off-campus agitations. To the rest of the board, too, Lawson's expulsion seemed a relatively straightforward matter, over and done with. This came at a time when the board was contemplating a major capital fund drive for the University. Lawson's sudden notoriety was ill-timed publicity nobody wanted.

Chancellor Branscomb, eager to bring a southern university to national prominence, had pondered the matter of segregation himself for years.

When Branscomb arrived as chancellor in 1946, Vanderbilt was thoroughly traditional, segregationist, southern. It was a white monolith, like any other major school in the South at mid-century. There was no mingling of races, no black students or faculty. The only jobs for blacks were menial ones. But the post-war climate was changing. New ideas of racial integration weren't going away.

Branscomb knew desegregation had to be faced sooner or later. He aimed to raise the University's profile and eliminate barriers to regional and national stature in the post-war boom of progress. As Conkin notes, he unveiled plans for starting new construction, expanding the campus, raising faculty salaries. He worked to subdue the power of the fraternities and sororities and inject a more studious spirit into campus life.

Branscomb had special fondness for the Divinity School. He had been dean of Duke's divinity school when he accepted the Vanderbilt chancellorship. He trained as a New

Lawson trained black students who staged sit-ins at Nashville's downtown department store lunch counters. His work as staff organizer for the Fellowship of Reconciliation alarmed members of Vanderbilt's Board of Trust.

Testament scholar himself, a Methodist theologian who appreciated Nashville's religious establishment. During his Vanderbilt tenure, he was pleased to see the Divinity School attract nationally known scholars for the first time.

In 1952 Branscomb issued a plan for integrating the University, aiming to complete it by the time he retired in 1962. Prompting the action, in part, were Divinity School professors who declared they could no longer in good conscience abide segregation in the school. (It was called the School of Religion at the time. The name changed to the Divinity School in 1956.)

As Branscomb saw it, the integration of the University would be an exceedingly delicate operation to carry off. The timetable had to unfold slowly. There was no point

alienating alumni donors or causing unrest on campus, he reasoned.

Integration of the School of Religion began in 1953, when a distinguished black minister in Jackson, Tenn., Joseph Johnson, made application. Branscomb took the request to the board, which approved it.

The decision made Vanderbilt the first private university in the Southeast voluntarily to allow integration at any of its schools.

No big fanfare was made about it. It was possible elsewhere on campus not even to know that integration was now official in one of the schools. It was understood that the new black student's presence on campus would be discreetly restricted. Because he was a family man, he would live off campus: Thus a dreaded debate over an old taboo, the integration of student housing, was avoided, for now.

It was a flawed arrangement, critics say. The policy could claim that Vanderbilt was quietly integrated, but it neglected to engage the whole campus in working through the moral reasons for it.

"The school's compromising posture of

eat at Rand. But no one told me. Two or three times a week, my (white) friends in Divinity and I would eat there. So a black person was visible on campus. Did anything bad happen? Of course not."

Other schools on campus slowly opened their doors to integration in the 1950s—the Law School, the Graduate School. In 1960, there was but a small handful of black graduate students—perhaps three—at Vanderbilt, while the undergraduate college remained unintegrated, unchanged. Traditional assumptions about race relations continued unchallenged in the larger world of Vanderbilt life.

Then Lawson got expelled. This time things were different. Most divinity professors were livid. They were shocked. A student of theirs had been kicked out without a hearing, and without faculty consultation. Having integrated before many other regional universities dared, Vanderbilt now appeared to be on the wrong side of the race issue, rejecting a civil rights movement that was gaining national momentum and sympathy.

"The consensus was that Branscomb was too wise to let the matter go further. We were

gradualist on race, a southern liberal who was sure that constitutional law would side with black Americans and inevitably bring changes benefiting them. His loyalty was to law and working within the legal process; he could not support civil disobedience as a weapon of social change.

Writing years later, Branscomb said taking no action against Lawson would have wrecked the University's plan for integration. "The circumstances at the time must be kept in mind," he writes in *Purely Academic: An Autobiography*. "In Nashville the situation was tense and inflammable. In the Southeast, Vanderbilt was carrying the risks of integration in private universities and colleges. We still had the critical step to take in the three undergraduate colleges, in the Medical School and in campus housing. To permit one uncooperative student who was, in fact, a paid organizer, to wreck this program seemed wasteful of much effort and much good will."

Feeding the climate against Lawson at the time was a festering fear of anarchy on campus. University elders had glimpsed the specter of student unrest during the 1950s, though

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requesting the University's permission to desegregate its own space while not pressing it to universalize the principle of racial inclusion throughout its domain failed to prepare the University for the trauma it would confront a few years later (with) James Lawson," says Peter Paris, a former divinity professor, writing in *Vanderbilt Divinity School*.

According to Lawson, racial justice could not be applied piecemeal.

"The University had to recognize that a desegregation process on a campus had to be more than cosmetic," Lawson says in a recent interview. "They were trying to maintain control without a real plan. We (African American students) were not supposed to

amazed when we were later told that Lawson was to be dismissed," says Lou Silberman, a former divinity professor who took part in the roundtable conversation for the new book.

The episode was aired in the press as never before. The Nashville sit-in movement, and Vanderbilt's connection, were becoming a daily story. The power of mass media, including the relatively new medium of television, was only dimly perceived and much underestimated. Suddenly, Kirkland Hall was getting calls from the wire services, from the *New York Times*: Why was James Lawson kicked out?

Branscomb's defenders have called him a

it had nothing to do with race. Occasional mob scenes, sometimes starting as panty raids, or random student clashes with police, were inane but real outbursts that shaped the adults' sense of dread of campus chaos in whatever form.

Branscomb's critics, on the other hand, have called him an inflexible autocrat, a law-and-order southerner born in segregationist Alabama. They blame him for letting his fear of disorder—and fear of a conservative Board of Trust, a group of aging white males, mostly products of Old South values, loyal to the beloved Vanderbilt of their youth—override any sympathy for a black man like Jim Lawson.



COURTESY OF THE TENNESSEAN

The Lawson affair boiled through the semester. Various delegations of divinity faculty still hoped to resolve the conflict with administrators. Depth of feeling about the issue flashed periodically. At the March 21 dedication of the Divinity School, some of the out-of-state guest speakers publicly embarrassed Branscomb by criticizing the University for expelling Lawson, as Conkin's book notes. Divinity alumni circulated a petition urging Lawson's return. Outside the Divinity School, cadres of professors were making their own pro-Lawson views known to Kirkland Hall.

A thousand miles away, other divinity students were protesting the Lawson case. At Yale, they followed the news from Nashville, and one spring day more than 200 students marched to publicize support for Lawson.

"Here was a guy, Jim Lawson, who was objecting to segregation, and he was in divinity school, and we were in divinity school, and so we wanted to be in solidarity with him," recalls Johnson, editor of *Vanderbilt Divinity School*, who protested as a Yale student.

Four students marching that day at Yale would loom in the destiny of Vanderbilt Divinity School. Johnson, TeSelle, Peter Hodgson, and Sallie McFague were eventually hired and became part of a faculty core that gave stability and identity to the place through

the three decades of the '70s, '80s and '90s.

Lawson, no longer in school in March 1960, meanwhile went about his civil rights field work across the South. There was plenty to do. He provided sit-in leadership in Nashville, too. Also, his new fame brought him invitations from divinity schools nationwide asking him to enroll there.

Back at the Divinity School, as the semester ended, the issue was ready to detonate. Professors were eager to take some sort of action before graduation. Talks with administration had stalemated. By mid-May, desegregation had been achieved at some of the Nashville stores, and without riotous violence. That seemed to vindicate the sit-in strategy. The nation was watching. Other divinity schools were watching. Editorials declaimed about Lawson, pro or con, in newspapers coast to coast.

Divinity faculty decided to vote to admit Lawson for the summer session so that he could complete his degree. They would bring their recommendation to Branscomb—and quit if their proposal was rejected. On May 30 it was indeed turned down. More than half of the 16 divinity faculty turned in their resignations.

The plot thickened. A number of other University professors (perhaps 20 out of more than 400) decided they too should resign. Their view was that an unraveling crisis of

Lawson was portrayed by the local media as an outspoken leader of the new movement, an outsider who defied local authorities in the name of divine laws of justice and dignity for black Americans.

academic freedom and moral principle at one school tarnishes the whole University. This group notably included a half-dozen professors in the Medical School. Their resignations would mean that millions of dollars in research funds would probably go with them and muddy the Vanderbilt name nationwide.

This got Branscomb's attention. One of the non-divinity professors ready to resign was Roos, a 33-year-old associate professor of physics. He had joined the Vanderbilt faculty in 1959 and had a cordial relationship with the chancellor. Now he used that good will to press Branscomb for a solution before it was too late.

On June 8 he met with Branscomb and the chairman of the Board of Trust, Harold S. Vanderbilt, a great-grandson of founder Commodore himself. Roos pleaded with these two elders to find a compromise before the resignations could take effect and damage Vanderbilt immeasurably.

Conditions were not favorable. There was mutual hostility between Branscomb and the divinity faculty. Reporters were all over campus, chasing tidbits and rumors, half expecting a final conflagration would bring the University down.

Now, though, serious but private negotiations ensued involving Harold Vanderbilt, Branscomb and Roos. Terms were complicated. There had to be a way to reinstate Lawson while allowing administration and board to save face. There had to be a way to bring back the faculty but also arrange for the removal of the divinity dean, Robert Nelson, a conspicuous defender of Lawson.

At this point, Roos recalls, Harold Vanderbilt, well into his 70s, took charge. The eminent *New Yorker* had been on the board since 1950—a legendary figure from America's monied class, a world-famous yachtsman, the inventor of contract bridge. But he was never much emotionally involved with the southern university that bore the fami-

ly name—until now. The bad publicity was becoming a family embarrassment for Harold Vanderbilt.

“To him it was a ridiculous situation,” Roos says in *Vanderbilt Divinity School*. “He did not appreciate that the administration had not been able to solve it. He did not appreciate the divinity faculty. To him, he was in charge of a university with problems about to explode. The people from *Life* were there, and he didn’t like it. He sat there and drove that meeting.”

A proposed solution, to be presented to the board, was hammered out over several hours by Branscomb and Harold Vanderbilt, with Roos there as adviser, go-between and messenger to the divinity faculty. The proposal was: Faculty resignations would be

proposal. The sticking point, apparently, was that the board refused to accept the return of a renegade divinity faculty.

“Surprisingly, a majority were willing to award a degree to Lawson so long as it was in absentia but were not willing to reinstate the rebelling faculty,” Conkin writes.

Within days, rumors spread that Branscomb was threatening to resign. Some 160 faculty (out of 195 contacted from the pool of 428, according to Conkin) signed a petition in support of Branscomb and Harold Vanderbilt against the board. Meanwhile, the University of Chicago reportedly put up an offer to hire all the Vanderbilt Divinity professors who quit.

This runaway climate of chaos set the stage for one final showdown. It was almost anti-

up on getting back in at Vanderbilt and was now enrolled at Boston University, where he graduated in August. He never received a degree from Vanderbilt University.

Branscomb, who died in 1998 at age 103, always said the Lawson affair had nothing to do with race and everything to do with a renegade student unwilling to uphold the law.

“The University’s position,” Branscomb wrote in March 1960, “thus was not to oppose the sit-in movement, nor to discipline the individual for infringement of a particular law, but to state that no student could remain in good standing who in a potentially riotous situation commits himself to an organized program of deliberate violation of law.”

During the turmoil, Lawson and Branscomb never met face to face. Battle was waged through

after vigorous campus debate and much undergraduate dismay, though no black students actually enrolled until 1964.

“The Lawson affair was one of the major events in the University’s life, but I don’t think the University, in dealing with social issues, learned that much from it,” says Gene Dav-enport, a divinity student in 1960 and now professor of religion at Lambuth College in Jackson, Tenn. “We’ll have to wait for the next social crisis to see.”

Others say the Lawson chapter forced Vanderbilt to do some hard thinking about race. Writer Roy Blount Jr. was a freshman in spring 1960, writing about the sit-in movement for *The Vanderbilt Hustler*.

“It was all very heady at the time,” recalls Blount, who was raised in Georgia. “For us, the Lawson episode raised the whole issue of race and integration to begin with. Most of us Deep-South kids had gone to schools where there were no black students. So when it was time to debate integration in the University, this was exciting. To me it was a simple issue. It was wrong, it was tacky, not to accept black students. But it was the black students, the sit-in protesters, who were taking all the risks, getting hit over the head.”

Ultimately for Branscomb, the Lawson outcome helped give the aging chancellor confidence and clout to carry on with his program of academic and campus life improvements before he retired, Roos argues. “Harvie Branscomb retired in 1962, and I think he lost practically a semester on his program, with the problems of the Divinity School and Lawson. On the other hand, I think it made him more determined than ever to push this program. Harold Vanderbilt had pushed him beyond where his local board wanted him to go, and he had won. This gave Branscomb more courage to proceed.”

Resolving the Lawson trauma resulted in an uninterrupted flow of national foundation money to University researchers. Bequests continued from Harold Vanderbilt who, according to Roos, took a more active interest in the University until his death in 1970.

The Lawson episode resulted in better campus procedures for handling student

disciplinary hearings. Also, the crisis helped clarify relations and define lines of authority between faculty and administration, perhaps hastening a more democratic model of campus governance.

“Chancellors ran the University out of their pocket back then,” says Frank Gulley, a divinity student in 1960 who later became a Divinity School professor. “Today a chancellor is more democratic, more likely to consult deans and faculty. The democratization of academic institutions was already taking place at the time.”

Off campus, the turmoil of 1960 became part of the legend of the Nashville sit-in movement. It solidified the Nashville movement’s reputation as the most effective model of non-violent resistance across the region.

“My expulsion became an example in the movement of a person’s willingness to pay the price,” Lawson says. “It became a way to strengthen our witness.”

In the short term, the Divinity School itself suffered loss of prestige after the bumpy ride of that spring semester. As Conkin notes, it was placed on probation for a year by the American Association of Theological Schools, owing to low faculty morale and poor relations between faculty and Vanderbilt administration and board. Dean Nelson left the school in August 1960 and eventually became dean of Boston University’s School of Theology.

Within a few years, Vanderbilt Divinity School had increased enrollments and attracted new professors of national stature, launching a 30-year era of high-profile stability. The 1969 part-time hiring of Kelly Miller Smith, the prominent Nashville African American pastor who had hosted Lawson’s 1960 workshops on non-violent protest, happened in Lawson’s wake.

The Lawson affair also sealed the Divinity School’s local reputation as a liberal citadel, for better or worse. Eventually a series of published commitments to racial equality and social justice appeared in the annual Divinity catalogue, a direct result of the Lawson turbulence. Today that list of commitments has expanded to include opposition to sexism and homophobia.

“The Lawson affair, and the courage of the faculty, looms large in my own understanding of the identity of the school,” says ethics professor Howard Harrod, who retired in spring 2002 after a Vanderbilt teaching career of more than 30 years. “The published commitments are logically related to that maelstrom.”

Divinity officials say this comprehensive roster of committed values, unusual for a major seminary, is a significant recruiting tool for the school.

In later life, both Branscomb and Lawson regretted never meeting in the wake of those stormy days and weeks of 1960.

In *Vanderbilt Divinity School*, Joseph Hough, divinity dean in the 1990s, recalls elderly Branscomb’s lingering feelings: “As our friendship deepened, he began to share with me some of his reflections on his own career at Vanderbilt, his high points and his low points. The one matter that seemed to trouble him most was his decision to expel James Lawson. He said that he put himself into a very difficult position by deferring to his Board of Trust in what he later saw to be an administrative decision.”

In 1996, 36 years after the storm, that regret was redressed. Hough arranged a meeting between these two would-be ideological rivals, in the Nashville home of Branscomb, then 101. “We actually visited as two human beings,” Lawson recalls, “as men who had been seen as adversaries. We had a very pleasant visit in his home. I felt no animosity in the man, and I had none toward him. He by then had recognized that he allowed some things to take a wrong turn in 1960, and he let me know he had moved beyond where he was. I let him know that at no time did I harbor any ill will toward him, and that I never broke faith with him as a fellow United Methodist.”

The encounter turned out to be a rich moment for two remarkable men and a symbolic closing to the rockiest semester in Vanderbilt University history. ▼

Battle was waged through intermediaries, written communiqués, and newspaper quotes.

To this day, debate is unsettled about whether they [Branscomb and Lawson] should have met, gotten to know each other, and somehow defused the crisis early on.

withdrawn, Dean Nelson’s resignation would be accepted, and Lawson would be allowed to take his degree. As Conkin and others note, the politics of the moment required ambiguity: Lawson would be reinstated but not readmitted. He could complete his degree (for instance, by correspondence or transfer of credits) but not return to campus while Branscomb was chancellor.

“Branscomb was scared of (board member) Stahlman, there is no question of that,” Roos says. “In defense of Branscomb, it is not a question of his administrative ability. He just did not feel he had the power to buck Stahlman. He was trapped. He had seen the collapse of all that he had worked to achieve. He did not see any way out until Harold Vanderbilt began to use his power and show that there was another side to this issue.”

The crisis flared to a climax the next day, June 9. The executive committee of the Board rejected the Branscomb/Harold Vanderbilt

climactic: On June 13, Branscomb, with Harold Vanderbilt’s backing, simply decreed to the board that reinstating the faculty rebels was an administrative matter. It was Branscomb’s responsibility, not the board’s, and he would quit if the board didn’t see it his way.

The board backed down. The professors were allowed to withdraw their resignations. Lawson was allowed to pursue his degree if he so chose. The crisis was officially over.

“I think this made the board happy because they frankly had the reaction that Branscomb had created the problem in the first place,” Roos says. “They had done what he had asked initially, then they were asked to reverse themselves—why did they throw the student out in the first place? If it was an administrative problem, then they did not have to take any action. Also, it was clear to the board that if they objected, they were going to lose both Branscomb and Vanderbilt.”

Ironically, Lawson by early June had given

intermediaries, written communiqués, and newspaper quotes. To this day, debate is unsettled about whether they should have met, gotten to know each other, and somehow defused the crisis early on.

“Harvie Branscomb saw Jim Lawson as a radical who messed up his timetable for integration instead of a man of devout faith who saw himself as a pastor,” says Walter Harrelson, Hebrew Bible professor who later became dean of the Divinity School (1967-75). “If Branscomb could have talked to Lawson, the whole mess could have been avoided.”

The consequences of the Lawson affair for the University were many, some measurable, some speculative.

People speculate whether the turmoil hastened integration University-wide. Society was moving quickly toward sympathy for integration in the early 1960s in any case. The undergraduate college officially adopted a policy of integration in 1962. It happened