Wear the TRADITION

www.vt.edu/classring
RINGING IN 100 YEARS OF TRADITION

BY LAURA WEDIN ’84

Following the creation of four class ring designs in one school year the ring tradition at Virginia Tech commenced with a bang.

Like many Virginia Tech traditions, a bit of legend, lore, and mystery surrounds the first class ring at Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College and Polytechnic Institute (popularly called VPI, now Virginia Tech). Although the Class of 1911 has typically been credited with introducing the VPI ring, recent research indicates a more complicated series of events. In The Bugle’s Echo, a comprehensive history of the early Corps of Cadets, Col. Harry D. Temple ’34 notes that the Class of 1911 ring arrived well after the class had graduated, citing a 1966 exchange article based on an interview with Fred Kel Prosser ’11. As class president, Prosser had promoted the idea of a class ring, but fellow class members remained undecided and so no rings were manufactured without any class-designated jewelry; not even a pin as earlier classes had selected.

When Prosser returned to Tech the following year for graduate work, he wrote letters to fellow Class of 1911 members encouraging them to approve to create a class ring. No doubt influenced by the established ring traditions at such schools as Virginia Military Institute (VMI) and West Point. A jewelry manufacturer agreed to produce the rings if Prosser provided the design, which he did in 1912 on his student drawing board. Months later, Prosser received the rings and faced the challenge of mailing them to his 1911 classmates who were already graduates. Without any class-designated jewelry; not even a pin as earlier classes had selected.

In those early years, the ring design and selection process was entirely student driven. The Class of 1914 is credited as the first to appoint a ring design committee during sophomore year. The resulting 1914 ring—with its classic oval-shaped bezel and twin eagles, sabres, rifles, and cannon barrel behind a shield bearing class numerals—has served as the basis for all designs. The 1911 ring design is slightly different and seems to have provided the design template for later rings that remained consistent through the 1920s. Despite its share of mystery and the speculation surrounding which class designed the initial ring or who had the original idea, the ring program at Virginia Tech experienced a banner ‘first’ year in 1911-1912 and celebrated the 100th anniversary with the design of the 2011 ring.

In the 1920s, the Virginia Tech class ring tradition solidified in the 1920s, gaining more prestige and coming to represent, along with senior rings and crops, a rite of passage for cadets. The ring design changed relatively little from year to year. A dog-eared shield bears the class year. “Virginia Polytechnic Institute” appears for the first time around the bezel on the 1923 ring, on earlier rings, the school name is on banners on the shank sides. The Class of 1922 introduced women’s miniature rings, which cadets often used as engagement rings, mimicking a West Point tradition. During the decade, the rings were manufactured by Auld’s, Charles H. Elliott, and Bailey, Banks, and Biddle, although the miniature rings were not always made by the same company. The Class of 1928 held the first ring banquet, when each cadet received his ring. A precursor to the ring dance, the banquet was held in the Old Mess Hall in early 1927.

The Class of 1930 introduced the first Ring Dance, held at War Memorial Hall on April 27, 1933, and began a Virginia Tech tradition still in place today. The Class of 1935 ushered in the first Ring Dance, held at War Memorial Hall on April 27, 1933, and began a Virginia Tech tradition still in place today. The Class of 1945’s Ring Dance was suspended from 1944 – 1946. As the United States entered World War II in late 1941, so did VPI. The effects of the war heavily influenced the college and its student body for the remainder of the decade. John Ginter ’42 entered the service directly after graduation, and his ring—painted green so it wouldn’t “shine up too much”—went with him. Many VPI class rings of the 1940s accompanied their owners on their war fronts.

In 1942, the Corps of Cadets petitioned bandleader Fred Waring to write a special song for Ring Dance. Waring’s song, “Moonlight and VPI,” with lyrics by Charles Gaynor, was introduced nationally on his NBC radio network show, broadcast from New York City on April 17, 1942.

That same year, the Class of 1945 chose “Victory” as the theme for its Ring Dance held in October. The year’s second Ring Dance was necessary because of the accelerated school year preparing Corps members to lay off for war. Class President Henry Dekker ’44 said the consolations for the women at the dance were made of war stamps, instead of flowers, to support the war effort.

The Class of 1943 raised money for a mobile blood bank. The Sophomore Prom, held in March 1943, was pressed into service as the Class of 1945’s Ring Dance. Halted temporarily
During 1944 through 1946, the Ring Dance was welcomed back in spring 1947, along with a flood of new war veterans returning to Tech to complete their interrupted education. Reflecting this change in the student population, the decade’s ring design committees included civilian members—albeit. In addition, rings were designed with a side dedicated to the Virginia Tech Corps of Cadets (VTCC) and a side dedicated to the Civilian Student Body (CSB), with the appropriate initials placed on the lower part of the ring’s shanks. Jostens produced the majority of the rings during the 1950s, followed by Herff-Jones. The 1951 ring was made by Balfour, and Dieses and Clust made the 1959 ring. Despite the rings’ different manufacturers, their design and bold look remained fairly consistent throughout the decade. All rings of the 1950s are of formidable size, and their designs feature the traditional eagles, flags, and crossed sabres. Although the portrait of President Bassie, and Duke Ellington. The War Memorial Gym served as the location until the event was moved to a newly renovated Squires Student Center in 1969 for the Class of 1970’s dance. A constructed version of the class ring, large enough to walk through, became a focal point at the dances during the 1960s. Couples would pass through the center of the ring and then pause for a photograph and kiss. Dance committees spent months on the design and creation of these oversized, detailed rings. Toward the end of the decade, a changing culture created the need to spell out the attire and protocol for the dances. The Class of 1969 Ring Dance guide, for example, clearly states that mini-skirts were not acceptable at either night of the festivities. Although the Vietnam conflict began to escalate in the late 1960s, followed closely by the counterculture movement, the decade’s major social event was the wedding of Prince Charles and Princess Diana, which was the event of junior year. The dances featured well-known orchestras led by Stan Kenton, Larry Elgart, Count Basie, and Duke Ellington. The War Memorial Gym served as the location until the event was moved to a newly renovated Squires Student Center. Orchestra bands for the formal night of the dance continued to be a highlight throughout most of the 1970s. Some of the popular acts that performed at the ring dances during the decade included the Beach Boys, the Grateful Dead, the Moody Blues, Little Anthony and the Imperials, the Chairmen of the Board, and the Supremes. Despite its declining enrollment, the Corps of Cadets played a major role in sustaining the traditions of the class ring and the Ring Dance during the 1970s. In fact, some cadets from the decade viewed the ring as a stabilizing anchor in a turbulent time. The rapid enrollment growth of the 1970s slowed in the 1980s, but Virginia Tech continued its transformation into a larger and more diversified university that included a school of veterinary medicine. The Blacksburg Transit, or “BT,” established in 1983, expanded the transportation options to campus as the off-campus student population began to exceed the campus housing capacity and the number of student automobiles overwhelmed the unpaved, gravel parking lots. The Gobbler mascot also seemed to evolve alongside these
changes, from the long-necked Gobbler of the 1970s to a shorter turkey mascot in 1982 called "The Hokiebird," the current representative of Virginia Tech, which premiered in fall 1987, the same year that Coach Frank Beamer’s ’69 took over as head coach of the football team. The now-familiar “VT” logo premiered in 1985, and the use of “Fighting Gobblers” shifted to “Hokies.”

After brief experimentation with changing the shape of the ring housing in the late 1970s, the ring eventually returned to a more traditional look. The 1981 and 1982 rings had no traditional chain around the bezel. The 1984 ring had a chain cleverly designed of evergreen needles around the bezel, representing class unity and growth with the planting of a spruce tree next to Squires. Traditional elements still had a major presence, but the depiction of new campus buildings, mountains, a rising sun, or the Cascades reflected a shift to a more traditional look. The 1981 and 1982 rings had no unique to the class also became part of the ring design and making the ring more personal to the group. A logo design competition was at an all-time high for the ring contract. ArtCarved, Herff-Jones, Jostens, and Balfour all made rings for men and women, as well as women’s fashion rings. Jostens became a crucial part of the ring design process. The class logo or a variety of other choices, became standard. Several new ring design conventions were established in the 1990s. A square-shaped bezel with a bold university seal encompassed a sunburst ring in the bezel, but also less cluttered and more unified. The consistent look of the traditional ring’s bold bezel and housing resulted from the university’s long-standing partnership with ring manufacturer ArtCarved/Balfour.

During the decade, digital artwork and utilization of CAD design for the ring molds transformed how the ring designs were created. The Class of 1998 had the first digitally created class logo. Similarly, Ring Premiere evolved into a large, well-attended multimedia show held in Burruss Hall, with computer animated video replacing carousel slide projections toward the end of the decade.

Marketing the ring using the most current trends became an important aspect of the ring committee’s work. Free T-shirt giveaways connected with the Ring Premiere began with the Class of 1998. During the renovation of Squires, beginning in 1989, Ring Dance moved to Cassell Coliseum for the classes of 1990-1992. Re-opening in 1992, the renovated Squires Apears on the 1995 ring, as several rings of the decade. In the early 1990s, a banquet night replaced one of the dance nights, with the formal dance on Friday and banquet on Saturday. By 1996, the dance night had moved to Saturday. Beginning with the Class of 1991, a university president or distinguished alumni or alumna was honored as namesake of the ring. A state partnership with ring manufacturer ArtCarved/Balfour.

The Class of 2009 was the first to depict the April 16 tragicVT memorial ribbon nestled in the design of the ring, on the class side, the words “We Will Prevail” on the university side. Amidst the information-overload decade, marketing became a crucial part of the ring design process. The class logo became a branding tool to uniquely identify the class and was usually incorporated into the ring design. The Ring Premiere presentations added digital animation of the ring and more video. In 2001, ring brochure websites that could be easily shared with parents and others were introduced. The Class of 2008 was the first to include a DVD of Ring Premiere videos with the hard-copy brochure.

The Centennial Big Ring located in Squires Student Center, 2nd floor. A gift from the Class of 2011.

2000s

Bookended by the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and the Great Recession, the 2000s have sometimes been called the “Lost Decade.” At Virginia Tech, Gen Y students—or Millennials—were team-oriented and civic-minded, enabling a shift from “me” to “we” against a backdrop of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. As great numbers were called to service and profound changes occurred across the country, the Hokie Nation and its ring tradition flourished.

Not surprisingly, the decade’s ring designs became not about most-besmirching, in turn, less and less cluttered and more unified. The consistent look of the traditional ring’s bold bezel and housing resulted from the university’s long-standing partnership with ring manufacturer ArtCarved/Balfour.

Commanding respect on the rings of the 2000s are the U.S. and Commonwealth of Virginia flags, the Pylons, 1872, U.T. Prosser, Burruss Hall, and the sabres. In addition, iconic emblems of campus life, such as the HokieBird and its tracks, Torgersen Bridge, Lane Stadium, “Burruss Hall,” the Skipper cannon, and the Flaming VT—a tradition of the Corps’ Hotel Company—appear on nearly every ring of the decade.

In a more unique depiction, the hourglass on the 2007 ring represents the playing of Metallica’s “Enter Sandman” as the football team runs onto Worsham Field. Amidst the information-overload decade, marketing became a crucial part of the ring design process. The class logo became a branding tool to uniquely identify the class and was usually incorporated into the ring design. The Ring Premiere presentations added digital animation of the ring and more video. In 2001, ring brochure websites that could be easily shared with parents and others were introduced. The Class of 2008 was the first to include a DVD of Ring Premiere videos with the hard-copy brochure.

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Dance weekends throughout the 2000s continued to be elegant, well-attended affairs held at Squires Student Center, utilizing newer technology, visuals, and lighting with each
Virginia Tech

2010s and next 100 years…

The start of the current decade ushered in planning to celebrate the first 100 years of the Virginia Tech class ring tradition and new ways to connect with class members.

The single greatest impact on the rings of this decade has been the classes’ widespread use of social media—Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter—to market their ring, Ring Premiere, and Ring Dance. The Class of 2011 posted videos of its ring premiere on YouTube, and the Classes of 2012 and 2013 created their own YouTube channel to display their videos. Nonetheless, oldschool methods, including posters around campus, A-frame signs on the Drillfield, and table cards at the dining centers, still remain effective ways to communicate to a class of more than 5,000 students.

While each ring continues to include long-held Tech traditions, newer ones have made their way onto the rings’ face.

For the Class of 2011 ring, actual Hokie Stone in either a light or a dark shade was made available for the first time as a gem choice. The lower part of the rings’ shanks also features a depiction of Hokie Stone, an element that continues on current rings.

The theme of the 2011 Ring Dance, “Moonlight and VPI,” recognized the heritage of the Fred Waring song played at every ring dance since 1942. Attendance at the dances increased, but because of the new enforcement of building capacity, the Class of 2011 was the first to impose limits on attendance. As a result, tickets, though still free, were issued prior to the event and limited to juniors.

As its class gift, the Class of 2011 commissioned a large cast bronze of the Centennial Ring, which was dedicated in September 2010. Housed in the atrium of Squires Student Center on a custom-made wood base with Hokie stone, the “Big Ring” depicts a re-created 1911 ring on one side and the 2011 ring’s university side on the other.

In addition, since November 2011, the ring tradition has been celebrated daily by way of a wrapped Blacksburg Transit “Ring Bus” proclaiming “Wear the Tradition” alongside a cast bronze of the Centennial Ring. Withstanding the ups and downs of gold pricing and a century of change, the Virginia Tech class ring figure, like the Corps of Cadets, continues on a strong course for another 100 years of tradition.

To learn more, go to www.vt.edu/classring.

CLASS OF 2016 RING COLLECTION

To the Class of 2016,

This premiere marks the approximate midpoint of our college career. Many of us have expanded our horizons immensely in the past two years experiencing all Virginia Tech has to offer. No two stories are alike just as no two Hokies are identical. The 2016 Ring Design committee used this as inspiration in creating the Class of 2016 ring.

Throughout the team’s design process, we worked to create a ring that represents our time as a class at Virginia Tech. This ring signifies tradition, both new and old, creating a tangible time capsule for the Class of 2016. Our vision was one of simplicity and timelessness, to design a ring that would endure the test of time in an elegant manner. Not only are we honored to have been selected for this task, but we are thrilled to reveal the final product of our hard work.

The ring serves as a reminder that while we are each unique, we are bonded together by the traditions and community spirit of this great Hokie Nation. When you first wear your ring at Ring Dance, make sure to reflect on the traditions that make each occasion so special. You are joining an exclusive group of Hokies and further forging the perpetual connection of spirit and joy. Be proud to be a part of over 100 years of tradition!

Sincerely,
Matthew Merrett
Ring Design Chair
Class of 2016

This ring signifies tradition, both new and old, creating a tangible time capsule for the Class of 2016. The Hokie Gold Legacy Program was established as a way to celebrate the Class of 2016’s contributions to Virginia Tech. This ring signifies tradition, both new and old, creating a tangible time capsule for the Class of 2016. The Hokie Gold Legacy Program was established as a way to celebrate the Class of 2016’s contributions to Virginia Tech.

The Hokie Gold Legacy Program was established as a Class of 1964 anniversary program to have gold from donated Virginia Tech alumni class rings included in future class rings. On May 3, 2012, the inaugural melt was held at the Kroehling Advanced Materials Foundry (also known as VT FIRE), a laboratory for students in Materials Science Engineering. A small portion of gold from this melt was reserved to include in future Hokie Gold melts.

Each year, some donated Hokie Gold will be passed down to the next class in perpetuity. For more on Hokie Gold, go to www.alumni.vt.edu/classrings/hokiegold.

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CLASS MOTTO:
AMBITIONE INCENSI VINCIMUS
IGNITED BY AMBITION WE TRIUMPH

CLASS COLORS:
Dark Red, Champagne, Pearl White