Hark upon the Gayle: A Depiction of the Experiences of the First Women Students at William & Mary

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Abstract

As William & Mary celebrates the 100th anniversary of admitting women students as the first public college in Virginia to institute a co-educational system, this paper explores the life and times of the women who have shaped the College's legacy for future women students. In researching the first women at William & Mary, we have found historical documentation, such as personal papers (letters and surveys) from both women students of the class of 1918 and a prior researcher; the Flat Hat, a student-run newspaper at the College; meeting minutes from the College Board of Visitors; William & Mary President Lyon Tyler's papers; and, administrative artifacts from the Office of the Dean of Women. The pages that follow chronicle the challenges and advancements women students and the Deans of Women encountered while contributing to gender equality at one of the oldest and most prestigious universities in America.

Keywords: co-education, first women students, history, student experiences

In March 1918, the Virginia State Legislature approved a bill that would dramatically change the landscape of the commonwealth's oldest college, as well as the nation's second oldest institution, The College of William & Mary. By deciding to admit women to the four-year, all-men institution, the legislators were breaking the historical norm for schools in Virginia that women should receive their postsecondary education in a separate format from men. Spearheaded by two progressive men, Senator Audrey Strode—for whom the bill would later be named—and William & Mary President Lyon G. Tyler, the admittance of women on the William & Mary campus came to fruition.

Against opposition from some members of the Board of Visitors, the current student body, alumni, and the Williamsburg community, women walked through the classroom doors at William & Mary in September of 1918. Thus, William & Mary began co-education. These women students of the class 1918 were immediately thrown into a world filled with strict governance by a new administrative position on campus, the Dean of Women, similar to a combination of present-day Dean of Students and Director of Residence Life positions (see later section on "Dean of Women"). Every woman, whether an administrator or a student, intentional or not, spent those first years at William & Mary building a lasting legacy of engagement, contribution, and community.

A Change to Campus

The State Senator's Initiative: The Strode Bill

In January 1918, Senator Audrey E. Strode, along with Delegate William B. Fitzhugh, sponsored a bill that would impassion many across Virginia with respect to the history and tradition at The College of William & Mary. This bill, later known as the Strode bill, was solely designed to introduce co-education to William & Mary. "Quite separate and distinct from another bill before legislature to make the University of Virginia a co-ordinate university" ("Board of Directors – Several Appropriations Made", 1918), the Strode bill was set to change the landscape of higher education in Virginia.

Senator Strode was a spirited supporter of education who had sponsored several bills that passed regarding the general topic of education in the 1908 legislature and was equally active in the co-ordinate bill that would affect the University of Virginia (Rogers, 1975). Regarding his passion for co-education in Virginia, in December 1917 Strode went as far as writing a letter, before even presenting his soon-to-be landmark bill, to Lyon G. Tyler—the sitting President at William & Mary. He wrote, "Frankly, I see no good reason why the Courses at your College should not be open to women on a co-educational basis, and it seems to me the time is opportune to move in that direction" (Rogers, 1975, p. 23).

On February 12, 1918, the Board of Visitors at The College of William & Mary supported the Strode bill in a six to four vote in favor of co-education (Board of Visitors of The College of William & Mary, 1918). In attendance for that meeting were Reverend Robert M. Hughes (Rector), the Honorable GP Coleman, the Honorable Samuel Walker Williams, Harris Hart,

Monty H. Barnes, WCP Taliaferro, Jackson Davis, Jas. R. Jordan, and Herbert F. Hutcheson. As it related to co-education, Reverend Hughes, Mr. Hutcheson, and Judge Williams voted in opposition. Another Visitor, Major James New Stubbs, who was unable to attend the meeting, sent a note within one week to President Tyler regarding, too, his dissention (Parrish, 1988).

Institution Readiness

The college president of that time, Lyon G. Tyler, was the son of a William & Mary graduate, former Chancellor of William & Mary, and 10th President of the United States, John Tyler. Lyon Tyler, a University of Virginia graduate, lawyer, and prominent writer ("Lyon Gardiner Tyler, 1853-1935," 2016), served as President of William & Mary from 1888 to 1919 and had brought the College back from the brink of extinction after closing for seven years due to damages incurred during the Civil War. A strong proponent of co-education—long before William & Mary started to recruit women students—in 1904, Tyler joined the Cooperative Education Commission of Virginia (Parrish, 1988). Further proof of his support for co-education comes in the form of a letter he would later write to one of the first women graduates, Catherine Dennis: Tyler said he was "…delighted to receive a letter from one of the noble band of women who broke the ice at William & Mary, and led the way to the emancipation of their sex. The noble 25 are embalmed in my affections and the example they set is worthy of all praise" (L.G. Tyler to C. Dennis, 1929). In retrospect, the successful implementation of the policy change on William & Mary campus was due to collaborative efforts both at the state and the institutional level. It was also due to the commitment at the senior leadership level, a bill quickly turned into viable actions in campus support.

Campus and Community Reaction

With the bill still yet to have full approval from the State Legislature, the sentiment across the William & Mary campus seemed unsupportive of the possibility "that women may be parading the historical campus of our College by next year this time" ("Co-education – women may be admitted to college", 1918). After the Virginia State Senate passed the Strode bill with a vote of 19 to 13—only the first step in implementing the bill—the *Flat Hat* questioned the motives for bringing co-education to William & Mary. Was it, "...to make this college one that will give a full

degree to the women of the state? ...Why should the tradition of our school—the noblest tradition of any institution—be sacrificed when such a principle could be tried elsewhere?" ("Co-education – women may be admitted to college", 1918). With the infrastructure needed to support these new members of the student body (including facility changes and addition of new faculty and staff), for some, it seemed to be more economical to improve the education at a normal school (typically referring to a teacher preparation school) so that it could produce the same type of degrees. The lament and reluctance of change was noticeably prevalent within the community.

On March 15, 1918, the Strode bill passed, making William & Mary the "first state-supported four-year college in Virginia to admit women on an equal basis with men" (Parrish, 1988, p. 7). The *Flat Hat* article that followed on April 24, 1918, showed strong objection from the current male student body and alumni. "Fellow students," it said, "we have been asleep" (p. 1), referring to the lack of objection to the bill prior to its passing. The article continued on to call for the students, alumni, and supporters to "make a stand" ("Sine Qua Non", 1918). "It *might* bring more money from the state to her [The College of William & Mary], but are we to sell our birthright for a mess of pottage?" At the time, William & Mary, like many other institutions around the country, was struggling to maintain enrollment numbers and merely stay afloat (Johnson, 1991). As men were being called off to serve in World War I, the higher educational community was looking for resourceful ways to keep its doors open. As previous statements show, this notion of innovative support through all avenues possible did not settle well with the William & Mary all-male student body and its traditionalist supporters. Retribution for the addition of women students to their ranks was solicited from those who believed in the rich history and tradition that was so intricately webbed into the fabric of William & Mary at the time, "We must, as gentlemen, treat the women with respect, but we can let them know that they are not wanted and use whatever influence we have or may have to drive co-education from our alma mater" ("Sine Qua Non", 1918). Concerns over changes and the overhauling of traditions among current members were understandable; however, the addition of women students and their soon-to-start college life eventually proved to have defeated the internal refusal as well as helped the institution gain financial support and sustainability. The

impact of the decision continued to benefit the institution in years to follow.

The Life and Times of the First Women Students

Even though negative sentiments surrounded the matriculation of women students in the Williamsburg community, the campus was ready for the growth and the College's administration needed to prepare for its new students. The aforementioned issues of on-campus housing and curriculum needed to be addressed. On April 19, 1918, the Board of Visitors deemed President Tyler able to give his recommendations at the subsequent meeting later in the year for the position of the Dean of Women at the College. This new station cost the College $2,000 (today, roughly equal to $32,422). Also discussed in the BOV meeting section was the addition of a Professorship of Chemistry and an Associate Professorship of Modern Languages; given the increased number of students enrolled, the College decided to bring more instructional support to increase institutional readiness (BOV, 1918).

Residence Life

With this influx of new students, William & Mary needed to make room for the women students to reside and learn. During the April 19 meeting, the Board moved to form a committee to oversee the construction of a new Boarding House. This project was to charge no more than $3,000 (today, roughly equal to $48,633).

Also noted at a meeting the following month was the administrative support of the new women's dormitory (BOV, 1918). A "Lady in Charge," whose position directly reported to the new Dean of Women, was discussed. This new hire would receive a one-room accommodation and board plus a salary: a coveted position for its economic benefits. The Lady in Charge was to see that the "...young women students were properly cared for" (BOV, 1918, p. 366), similar to the men's supervisory structure.

Furthermore, Tyler Hall, the newest building on campus originally for the male students, was to be the dormitory for women and center of their social life. All women who were not to reside in the city of Williamsburg were required to live in one of the 14 foot by 16 foot double rooms. Each room was fitted with "running water, two large closets, two windows, and two single iron beds, bedside dressers, table, and chairs" (Catalog 1918-1919, p. 54). These nine-month accommodations were available for $35 (today, roughly

equal to $567), and students had the option to pay in two installments.

Curriculum

The landscape in the William & Mary classrooms would have to change as well. Many of the new women students would participate in the system that trained students to work in education. At the time, and for many years that followed, this was referred to as *normal training*, or teaching preparation, and it welcomed both women and men to become teachers. Women who were eligible for scholarships to support this educational path would also pledge their service to working in Virginia's public school system. Along with the normal training, the addition of the Home Economics Department, established in 1918 under the Smith-Hughes Act, validated the need for the additional faculty voted in by the Board of Visitors (see Table 1 for an example of curriculum).

Furthermore, a Physical Director of Women joined the staff at the College. In 1919, this position was part of the Department of Physical Education and reported to the Athletic Director. Under this new Director, Bertha Wilder, women students participated in numerous activities such as basketball, field hockey, baseball, and tennis. A three-hour minimum requirement of physical education had specific attire deemed appropriate for their participation, "black bloomers, white middy blouses, black ties, and rubber soled shoes" (Catalog 1919-1920, p. 106).

The First Deans of Women

By 1918, the position of Dean of Women was becoming more common as a professional choice in higher education. However, the position had been developing for quite some time, going through many different phases before becoming the formal and broadened position introduced to William & Mary students. According to Nidiffer's (2002) study on the first Deans of Women nationwide, there were five stages for the early development of the profession:

- Pioneers and innovators: These Deans paved the path for a new field in higher education to meet the needs for women students who were largely ignored by their male administrators.
- Groundwork for pre-professionalization: Stage two featured earning the recognition from university presidents and other residents that women students had unmet needs.
- Collective efforts from an increasing number of women practitioners to overcome resistance imposed on women administra-

tors by male faculty or from their "clients" (the women students) about rigid supervision.

- A growing professional maturity among the deans that rationalized appropriate intellectual focus on a Dean's expertise and emancipated Deans of Women from remaining on the level of matron, allowing them to develop programs and policies to accommodate the higher needs of their clients.
- Emergence of more tangible aspects of the profession, including continua of conferences and professional organizations among the Deans of Women.

During the College's first three decades of admitting women students from 1918 to 1947, four Deans of Women were at the administrative helm for women students' collegiate experiences: Caroline F. Tupper (1918-1919), Bessie Taylor (1919-1925, titled the Social Director of Women), Anne M. Powell (1925-1927), and Grace W. Landrum (1927-1947). The two women that held the position of Dean of Women during the time of the first graduating class of women, Tupper and Taylor, are notable for their roles and contributions in shaping the college experiences for the class of 1918.

When the Board of Visitors reconvened on July 10, 1918, they voted on the addition of the new Dean of Women position. It was by President Tyler's recommendation that BOV agreed to elect Caroline F. Tupper to the office. Her tenure was to last for one year beginning on the first day of classes, September 18, 1918 (BOV, 1918). Tupper was a well-accomplished academic by the time she joined William & Mary. Originally from Charleston, South Carolina, she received her Bachelor of Arts, Master of Arts, and Ph.D. in English from Radcliffe College in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Prior to coming to the College, Tupper "had previously taught high school and college English" (Parrish, 1988, p. 11). She was the winner of the Caroline I. Wilby Prize for the best original work in Doctoral dissertation across departments of her class, *Oliver Goldsmith as a Critic*. Dr. Tupper put her educational experiences into good use as she helped to better the female students' curricular and co-curricular experiences. She was also the one to oversee on-campus social events, such as being a chaperone to organized dance events ("Opening dances – Many Alumni and former students enjoy the festivities," 1919). Tupper left the position after her one-year appointment. In retrospect, the scope of her work covered many

aspects of today's student affairs, including residence life, academic advising, and event planning. The position of Dean of Women was an integrated administrative approach to support women students through their college life.

During the 1919 winter break, the College added three new positions, including the new Social Director of Women Students, another title for Dean of Women. Bessie Taylor, a former high school English teacher from Richmond, Virginia, joined William & Mary in this executive role and was "...the only woman member of the Virginia State Educational Commission, which was created by the state legislature during the 1918 of that body" ("W. and M. faculty increased," 1920).

The women who followed in the role of Dean of Women continued on the traditions established by their predecessors. From the office documents (Landrum, G. W., 1890-1995) retrieved from the last Dean of Women, Grace Landrum, the position mainly concentrated in two areas: (a) direct handling of women students, including: informing students and their parents of scholarship deficiencies, informing those who had achieved good grades they had made the "privilege list," directly talking to students who were struggling with school work, supervising students who were on probation, enforcing college restrictions with women student organizations; and, (b) providing institutional information to the state government or district intelligence office, generating reports with the Dean of Men on students' performances at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, participating in curriculum change, working with faculty on students' misconduct and sending out important notices, and contacting the bursar's office. Compared to the early years, the responsibilities of the Office of Dean of Women continued to expand within institutions and started to build greater networks on a regional and state level.

The Class of 1918

The first cohort of women wanted to have as traditional a college experience as they could. Not only did they have to follow strict rules and guidelines pertaining to their classroom experiences, they also had to be careful when navigating their new roles as co-eds. These young women worked hard to establish themselves on campus not just as the token women students; they viewed themselves as active contributors to the William & Mary community. The large number of activities created by and for the women on campus gave them more oppor-

tunities to explore their interests and consider possible career options, adding more meaning to the purpose of women receiving college education. The first women students spared no effort in showing commitment to improving themselves, advocating for more activities, and gradually reached and changed the longer, nay-saying members of the community.

Establishing a voice. The 1918 cohort of women were quick to realize the overarching impact they were to have not only on the male students and William & Mary community as a whole, but also on their small group of peers. "As the end of the first month draws near," a student said, "we find that the occupants of Tyler Hall are taking on more and more seriously the determination to make this year the most prosperous in their lives and one of the most successful in the history of the college" ("Concerning Mary," 1919). The students were eager and "alive at all times," often considered an "animated group of women," and intent on taking part in all that their new-found privilege at the College had afforded them ("Concerning Mary," 1919).

The first public voice of the women debuted in the *Flat Hat* (1919) on February 5 in a section titled, "The Mary's." The women publicly expressed their New Year's resolution of studying harder and getting better grades, and committed continuing their good practices while on the basketball team. As with the addition of the new Physical Director of Women, the women were also hoping to establish tennis, volleyball, and field hockey teams to enrich their college athletic experiences. And they did. In 1920, at a Whitehall Literary Society meeting, 14 women students received awards by the Athletic Council for their basketball performances ("Numerals awarded co-eds," 1920).

Women students also participated in the *Cercle Francais*, or French Conversation Club, which was held on Friday afternoons in the Tyler Hall reception room. The women had the opportunity to practice through informal conversations, and this experience was intentionally built to be an element in the social as well as the intellectual life of the College. The club had 11 participants, six of whom were women.

By the second semester, in March of 1919, women students presented "Three Pills in a Bottle" and "A Flower of Yeddo" at Cameron Hall on a Saturday evening. The well-received plays populated the *Flat Hat* with positive comments: "splendid," "well-carried," "pleasantly entertaining," and "featuring a simple by lovely stage setting" ("Girls

presented splendid play – 'Three Pills in a Bottle' and 'A Flower of Yeddo' declared artistic success," 1919).

Contributions to the community. After the enrollment of women students, opportunities for the women continued to burgeon in the community. Young Women's Christian Association (Y.W.C.A.) soon joined the campus along with its male counterpart to welcome and serve students with monthly programming including Bible study events. The organization firmly believed that the two "Y's" would be the most successful of the college activities ("The joint "Y" reception," 1920). The Y.W.C.A. explicitly made plans to ask every woman student to join its membership, and later became involved in the events held in the first few weeks for newly admitted women arriving on campus ("The co-eds – new year opens with a rush," 1920). The new cohort of women also created an ambitious climate for the newcomers. According to the *Flat Hat*, "the most important thing to be remembered is that there can be no unity without cooperation, and no success without unity, for which reason each girl is urged to take an interested part in as many school activities as possible" ("The co-eds – new year opens with a rush," 1920).

Notably, the first women's fraternity, Gamma Omega, was official on campus on October 1, 1920 ("The joint "Y" reception," 1920). Beta Sigma Chi soon emerged as the second Greek letter society, which allowed for more opportunities to engage on campus and make life in Tyler Hall more interesting for the women students ("Pertinent remarks about the doings across campus," 1920). Another organization of note, the Whitehall Literary Society formed specifically for the women in Tyler Hall. The *Flat Hat* addressed every woman on campus to be a "proud" member of this society which represented "dignity and earnestness" ("Around Tyler," 1919). The women participated in lectures such as "Journalism as a Vocation for Women," which gave practical recommendations on how to prepare for a four-year course of study ("Literary evening," 1919).

Life outside of the classroom. All students had to adhere to certain rules to maintain order in settings beyond their academic settings. When leaving campus, they were to go in two couples, signing out and in with the name of their escort and destination. Additionally, no young men were allowed to visit Tyler Hall without wearing a coat (Parrish, 1988).

In the first few years of co-education, news or articles related to the women students addressed them

either as "the Mary's" or "the co-eds." According to the *Flat Hat* ("The *Flat Hat* elections – replete with exciting races for honors among students," 1920), the women students were not only active among their own Whitehall Literary Society and athletics, but also took part in superlative elections held by the periodical. Several prizes went to the women students including "most popular co-ed," "prettiest co-ed," and "most in love co-ed." Although there were several titles for women to run against each other, the majority of competition came in the male categories, specifically, "best athlete," "laziest man," "best football player," and 18 other superlatives. The women were extremely interested in embracing their school spirit, showing support of their male counterparts as they participated in athletic events. "The feeling runs high among the Mary's to help build up William & Mary, to put her on a footing with the best colleges, and keep her from ever feeling that she lost anything by the admission of women to her sacred walls" (Walker, 1974).

There was no shortage of opportunities to keep the new women at William & Mary occupied. From organized events, like hockey matches between the first and second year women ("Around Tyler," 1919), to seeing a movie on Duke of Gloucester Street, these women found opportunities for fun all over and around campus. They enjoyed attending bonfires, reminiscing about the fact that the "boys almost burned down a dilapidated house," and played practical jokes on faculty, like moving the Spottswood cannon onto a professor's front porch after a victory over Richmond College, as recounted by Marion Webb Tyler (Parrish, 1988). Ms. Webb Tyler also recalled that "on several occasions the boys turned on the fire alarm in the middle of the night to see the women lined up in the night clothes" (Parrish, 1988).

Historical Significance

When Lyon Tyler resigned as President from the College, the *Flat Hat* (1919) reflected on a piece of news titled, "Dr. Lyon G. Tyler Resigns After Thirty Years of Faithful Services." The article described the establishment of the women's department as a "great innovation in the higher educational field in Virginia" and "begun this session with a promising enrollment of representative students." Admitting women to all courses at William & Mary allowed those women to "all the freedom of college life" (p. 1) and also marked a distinctive victory to close President Tyler's service at the College. The discrete shift in the opinions within the *Flat Hat* also mirrored the newfound

praise of the College's new direction after the community's earliest opposition to women in 1919. The ones who initially posed great opposition to co-education, soon changed their minds once they realized the women students were just as worthy of a great four-year education as themselves.

It is easy to see how the perception of women on the campus could have led to an uproar among the current students, staff, faculty, alumni, and the local Williamsburg community. The addition of women to the student body posed a potential sea change within the school dynamics at William & Mary. This may have been too overwhelming for the school to accommodate as well as accept given the pride it took in its strong traditions. From something as simple as the addition of a new professor—which, had the all-male population continued to steadily grow, would have never become a challenge, or even an obstacle—to more extreme budgetary issues like the addition of facilities to support new departments and housing of a new type of student, there were many areas of protest for those so inclined to make an argument for the denial of women students. Even today, we see protestors and abstainers who are either not privy to, or do not care to learn more about, the general trends of higher education and the decision-making process of local policymakers and educators.

Luckily for the William & Mary community, Senator Strode, President Tyler, and their supporters were able to persevere in their quest to bring women to campus. As class began in September 1918, it seemed as though those immediate and active contributors who were new to the campus successfully washed away many of the fears and trepidations of dissenters. The Deans of Women were in charge of designing and implementing new rules and regulations as they pertained to the new students and expected the students to "toe the line" and create the standards for future women to come. The women who graduated in the first classes at William & Mary set the tone and served as great examples for future generations of women to be strong leaders—even trailblazers—when it came to helping a community become more diverse, more accepting, and better prepared to deal with the ever-changing pace of higher education itself and the society.

In the papers, articles, and books gathered regarding the women at William & Mary, there was no evidence to assume the women like Caroline Tupper, Bessie Taylor, and Catherine Dennis had any idea about the lasting impressions they would

make on one of the most historical campuses in the United States. However, there is absolutely no doubt in our minds that had these women not been the pioneers they were, William & Mary today would look vastly different in its legacy. They helped make the 1918 cohort a successful class. Their beliefs and values benefited many more generations to come.

Today some of the most successful alumni from the College are women. Many have been successfully serving our country in many different capacities. Dina Titus '70, is currently serving as a U.S. Representative for Nevada and her classmate, Mary Jo White '70, was the 30th Chair of the Securities and Exchange Commission serving under three sitting U.S. Presidents. More recently, Stephanie Murphy '00 has become the first Vietnamese-American member of the U.S. Congress, representing the 7th Congressional District of Florida.

Other notable William & Mary women alumni include Chief Scientist at National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Ellen Stofan '83; Pulitzer Prize winning writer Katherine Boo '86; Oscar-nominated actress Glenn Close '74; and, Jill Ellis '88, the current head coach of the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team.

As William & Mary celebrates its 100th year anniversary for co-education and greets the first woman president in its history, we find it timely and important to represent part of the dusted history from archives and faded pictures to the audience again, in memory of the first women students, administrators, faculty, and state constituents who made these changes all happen.

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