

History of the Status of Minority Groups in the Bryn Mawr Student Body

The history of diversity at Bryn Mawr has been recorded and examined in very sporadic ways and is not easily traced. Nor is it easily understood outside of the context of the history of American society and especially of higher education within that society. It is not, however, a simple matter to provide context for an examination of the history of diversity at Bryn Mawr. Of the three published histories or collections of reminiscences of the College, none contains information on this issue. [They are: *What Makes a College?* A History of Bryn Mawr by Cornelia Meigs (1956, Macmillan), *Carey Thomas of Bryn Mawr* by Edith Finch (1947, Harper and Bros.), and *A Century Recalled: Essays in Honor of Bryn Mawr College* (1987, Bryn Mawr College Library).] The racial and ethnic composition of classes was not recorded until quite recent times. Pieces of the history which seem very important are missing. We know, for instance, nothing of the first black student at Bryn Mawr except that she came in the '20's and stayed only one week.

What follows is a chronologically organized selection of the materials available in the archives and the M. Carey Thomas papers. It does not represent all of the evidence available. Since the *College News* is indexed only to the 1940's and the newer *Bryn Mawr-Haverford News* is not indexed at all, one would need to read very thoroughly in those back issues to get the fullest possible picture of recent decades. There are also letters and oral histories from individual alumnae which would be useful, as well as living alumnae, staff, and faculty members who should be interviewed to make the account more complete. And any thorough history of diversity at Bryn Mawr would include more kinds of difference and look at the history of the staff and faculty as well. The attempt here is to suggest a rough time line for the inclusion of black, Jewish, and Asian students at Bryn Mawr. It is a very unfinished beginning to the history of diversity at Bryn Mawr.

1877

To start at the beginning, it is useful to remember the text of Dr. Joseph Taylor's will in which he dedicated his estate to the establishment of a college for the "advanced education of females." It is dated January 19, 1877. He directed that his money be used to erect buildings "for the comfort advanced education and care of young women, or girls of the higher classes of society." Preference in admission was to go to members of the Society of Friends, but in all cases those were to be preferred who were "of high moral and

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religious attainments and good examples and influence." Diversity in the student body was not one of his goals.

History of Black Students at Bryn Mawr

1903

Fear of the withdrawal of Southern students from the College apparently led President M. Carey Thomas to encourage Jessie Fauget, the first black graduate of Girls High School in Philadelphia, to attend Cornell rather than Bryn Mawr.

1906

A letter from M. Carey Thomas to a teacher in Washington, D.C. suggested that black students would be uncomfortable among Bryn Mawr's largely Middle Atlantic/ Southern students.

As I believe that a great part of the benefit of a college education is derived from intimate association with other students of the same age interested in the same intellectual pursuits, I should be inclined to advise such a student to seek admission to a college situated in one of the New England states where she would not be so apt to be deprived of this intellectual companionship because of the different composition of the student body. At Bryn Mawr College we have a large number of students coming from the Middle and Southern states so that conditions here would be much more unfavourable.

[Ed. note: In 1909-10 51/337 undergraduates were from Southern states.]

1916

M. Carey Thomas's address at the opening of college included her thoughts on white intellectual supremacy and expressed pride in the ethnic homogeneity of Bryn Mawr students. While she was certainly not alone among academics of her time in her eugenic theories, they cannot be ignored.

If the present intellectual supremacy of the white races is maintained, as I hope that it will be for centuries to come, I believe that it will be because they are the only races that have seriously begun to educate their women....

It seems to be only in a strictly limited temperate zone, only on a very small part of the earth's surface that men can maintain continuous intellectual activity. Roughly speaking this zone includes Great Britain,

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Scandinavia, France, Spain, Italy, Germany, Austria, Belgium, Holland, probably the greater part of the United States and Canada, some parts of Russia and South America, and perhaps parts of certain other countries that have not yet been sufficiently investigated.... One thing we know beyond doubt and that is that certain races have never yet in the history of the world manifested any continuous mental activity nor even any continuous power of organized government. Such are the pure negroes of Africa, the Indians, the Esquimaux, the South Sea Islanders, the Turks, etc....

These facts must be faced by a country like the United States which is fast becoming, if it has not already become, the melting pot of nations into which are cast at the rate of a million a year the backward peoples of Europe like the Czechs, the Slavs, and the south Italians. If the laws of heredity mean anything whatsoever we are jeopardizing the intellectual heritage of the American people by this headlong intermixture of races....

...if we tarnish our inheritance of racial power at the source our nation will never again be the same....

Our early American stock is still very influential but this cannot continue indefinitely. For example, each year I ask each freshman class to tell me what countries their parents originally came from and for how many generations back their families have been on American soil. It is clear to me that almost all of our student body are early time Americans, that their ancestors have been here for generations, and that they are overwhelmingly English, Scotch, Irish, Welsh, and that of other admixtures, French, German, Dutch largely predominate. All other strains are negligible. Our Bryn Mawr College students therefore as a whole seem to belong by heredity to the dominant races. You, then, students of Bryn Mawr, have the best intellectual inheritance the world affords.

1920's

A black student from New England entered Bryn Mawr and stayed only one week. At the time of the Reunion of Black Alumnae in 1975 it was reported that she had requested that her name not appear on lists of alumnae.

1927

The minutes of the Board of Directors meeting for April 27, 1927 record that: "It was voted to authorize the President

to reply to inquiries that colored students will be admitted to the College only as non-residential students."

The first black student who would graduate from Bryn Mawr, Enid Cook A.B. 1931, entered and lived at the home of Dr. Cadbury her first year. After that she lived with black families in the village of Bryn Mawr.

1930

The second black student who would graduate from Bryn Mawr entered, Lillian Russell, A.B. 1934. Boston area alumnae first tried to discourage her choice of Bryn Mawr because they felt it was not "the best place for a coloured girl..." not "the happiest place for her to be for her own sake." When she still wanted to go, they gave her an Alumnae Regional Scholarship but were unsuccessful in having the residency restriction waved. She spent her first weeks living with President Park and after that lived with black families in Bryn Mawr. She majored in Chemistry and Philosophy and went on to earn an M.A. in Organic Chemistry at Howard University.

1931

In the January Alumnae Bulletin Helen Bell of the Class of 1931 wrote a column called the "Undergraduate Point of View." She reported that "the College has put to the students the question of whether or not this is the time for the negro students to become residents of the halls. At College Council, all who spoke seemed to approve the change. However, the Council is not representative of the actual feeling of the college on this subject and it is a matter which needs more general discussion among students before any action may be taken."

Two "open letters" were printed in the April Alumnae Bulletin, one from a 1922 alumna saying that she understands that "the question of taking colored students into the dormitories has arisen" and expressing her vigorous opposition. She writes that her stance is not based on "blind prejudice against the colored race" and that she feels that "we have shirked, so far, in dealing squarely with the negro problem in America. It is something that must be faced eventually--the sooner the better--and by the most competent and intelligent persons possible. On the other hand, I do not feel that Bryn Mawr would be serving the best interests of the negro by admitting her to the college as a resident student, nor do I think it fair to the white students already there."

President Park responded:

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...Personally, I agree with all the premises of your letter and arrive at the opposite conclusion as to Bryn Mawr's responsibility, but officially I shall not bring up the matter of the residence of negro students this year. There is much difference of opinion, I think, in all groups connected with the college. I think perhaps no group alone should have the final decision in the matter, although it was the Directors who passed the resolution as it now stands; but I shall be unwilling to propose that a negro student should come into residence while there is strong undergraduate feeling against it, even although the feeling, as I believe it is, is actually on the part of a minority. I have special deference for undergraduate opinion because, while the undergraduates are no more interested in the college than the faculty or alumnae, they would have the practical problem to deal with in direct form."

1936

Madeleine Sylvain, a black woman from Haiti, came to Bryn Mawr as an AAUW Fellow to do graduate work in the Department of Social Economy. She lived in Radnor Hall, then used by all resident graduate students and a few undergraduates, from 1936-38, returned to Haiti to work, and came back to Bryn Mawr in 1940-41 to complete her Ph.D.

1941

Adelaide Cromwell, a black woman with an A.B. from Smith, came to Bryn Mawr to do graduate work and lived in Radnor Hall from 1941-42.

1942

Lily Ross Taylor, Professor of Latin, wrote to President McBride asking that Mary Huff Diggs, a black woman entering the graduate school, be allowed to live in Radnor. She also asked that there be a definite policy so that special action would not be needed in each case.

On November 18, 1942, the Executive Committee of the Board of Directors recommended that the restriction "limiting the students eligible for admission as resident students be rescinded, and that hereafter all students be admitted according to the rules and regulations in force as adopted by the Faculty from time to time."

1944

A letter written by Mrs. Broughton, who the College's second Director of Admissions, included this paragraph:

On the special question you raise about our action on the admission of negro and Jewish students there is not much to say. We have a good many applications from Jewish students and very few from negro students. In both the graduate and undergraduate schools we have admitted negro students if their admission was justified by the quality of the student in relation to that of the entering group....

1948

The first residential black undergraduate, Gloria M. White, received her A.B.

The same alumna who had written the open letter in 1931 opposing the admission of black students to residence wrote President McBride to ask whether the rumor were true that this has occurred. Miss McBride responded:

The rumor you hear that we have colored students either as non-resident or as residents, is true. One or two were in residence in the Graduate School during the thirties, and there are one or two now. We also have now one negro student in the Undergraduate School. She apparently gets on very well indeed, despite the fact that there are at present no more.

Negro students have never presented any problem as far as I know. I suppose the racial problem is more easily met if there are many races - Chinese and Indian as well as negro and others.

1954

The Undergraduate Association as well as President McBride put pressure on the El Greco Restaurant in Bryn Mawr which was serving blacks at the counter and in mixed groups in the booths, but not alone in booths. The matter had been brought to the owner's attention two years earlier with no effect. He said that he would lose both his customers and his help if he changed the policy. When a black student was again refused service, the presidents of Self Government and the Undergraduate Associations spoke to the owner and Miss McBride asked the college lawyer to give his opinion on whether the Pennsylvania law prohibiting discrimination in places of public gathering was applicable. The Undergraduate Council records report that, "the matter was discussed by the student body, and it was generally felt that the college, in accepting Negro and White students on an equal basis, had a responsibility for other welfare in the community, and that every effort should be made to end the discrimination." When Miss McBride sent college officials to report that the college lawyer felt that the restaurant was breaking the law, the owner decided that the

climate of opinion had changed enough to make it possible for them to change their policy.

By this time the College was also working closely with the National School Service and Fund for Negro Students, a non-profit college advisory and referral agency for black students.

History of Asian Students at Bryn Mawr

1889

Ume Tsuda entered Bryn Mawr from Japan. She stayed two and a half years and went on to found Tsuda College in Japan.

1900

The Japanese Scholarship Committee was formed to enable more Japanese women to come to Bryn Mawr. Michi Matsuda came first, and then Michi Kawai, who took her A.B. in 1904.

1917

The Chinese Scholarship Committee was formed to offer some Chinese women the possibility of coming to Bryn Mawr. Liu Fung Kei, one of their scholars, graduated in 1922.

1949

The first Japanese woman to come to Bryn Mawr after the war entered.

History of Jewish Students at Bryn Mawr

1926

An alumna wrote to President Park asking if Bryn Mawr had quotas for Jewish students. She assumed that they did in her day, since there were always very few Jewish women. She was asking because a Jewish friend was interested in Bryn Mawr for his daughter. Miss Park responded: "There is absolutely no restriction on the number of Jewish students either by establishing a quota or weighing the nationality in admission. The number remains steady because a steady number apply."

1939

President Park responded to an inquiry from Dr. Compton about the National Conference of Christians and Jews. She wrote that "The situation at Bryn Mawr seems to me on the

whole normal and 'unconscious' and I feel no need of action at the present time. I should hesitate to stir up any dormant feeling. Last year the President of the Bryn Mawr League was a Catholic. In November of this year the whole college united to bring four Jewish refugee students to Bryn Mawr on scholarships. On the faculty we have, in addition to Protestants, both Catholics and Jews. If the situation here changes and some action seems wise I will suggest a committee and communicate with you."

1944

A letter written by Mrs. Broughton, who became the College's second Director of Admissions, included this statement: "On the special question you raise about our action on the admission of negro and Jewish students there is not much to say. We have a good many applications from Jewish students and very few from negro students....There has been no problem about the Jewish students at Bryn Mawr, but we did notice for the first time this year that some few schools were sending an extraordinary number of Jewish applications."

1948

An alumna wrote to President McBride about a New Republic article by Bruce Bliven citing Bryn Mawr, Haverford, and Swarthmore as among 15 colleges in which there was a conspicuously small proportion of Jews. She didn't know what the college's policy was, but felt that the time had come to enunciate it.

President McBride responded that the percentage of Jews in a class varied between 11 and 16 per cent. These figures were probably low since no student was required to state her religion. The question about religion on the application was only used to send the names of entering students to the nearest church of their denomination on their arrival. The information was not misused. Perhaps the question should be omitted. "We do not discriminate, and on the whole that fact is pretty well known."