

SWEET BRIAR COLLEGE:
A VIEW OF WOMEN'S EDUCATION

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Introduction

How was women's education viewed in the early part of the twentieth century? Was the final goal to prepare women for the outside world in terms of careers, whether business or homemaking, or merely to "finish" them? Through research in the Sweet Briar College archives, I have attempted to answer these and various other questions. Although my research was limited to the materials of one small Southern college, I have attempted to avoid any esoteric qualities in the hope that my conclusions may be applied generally and therefore be of interest to all.

My findings are by no means conclusive; there remain many unanswered questions and dangling theories that require further documentation. My first experience in archival research proved to be a delight as well as a disappointment when I found that documents were not neatly filed and arranged or that they were non-existent.

Despite gaps and uncertainties, there is much documented evidence as to the attitudes toward feminine education in the early 1900's.

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A girl will be more respected with an education than with wealth. I think female education is too much neglected-- they are the ones who have the first education of children and ought to be qualified to instruct them correctly.¹

Such were the words of Elijah Fletcher, father of the founder of Sweet Briar College. His view is somewhat antiquated; the purpose of women's education is hardly to qualify them in child instruction, but he had the beginnings of an idea that was to become increasingly important. Women's education was neglected,, particularly in the South. In 1901, Sweet Briar was chartered, as instructed by Indiana Fletcher Williams in her will. Mrs. Williams wished to establish and maintain "within the state of Virginia a school or seminary for the education of white girls and young women..."² As stated by the Board of Directors, several years later,

...It is the desire of the Board to erect the college in an area previously neglected whereas the North had Vassar, Wellesley, Smith and Bryn Mawr. It was the resolve of the Board that Sweet Briar Institute shall attempt to offer young women of the South...³

an education of which to be proud.

What would be the aim of this new college? Obviously education was the primary goal, but what kind of education? There was more to a college education than learning how to become a good wife and mother. When the college opened in 1906, the Board of Directors had their own ideas of what education meant. They desired to "...combine harmoniously, literary and scientific studies with thoroughly practical training in certain artistic and industrial branches of knowledge."⁴; a liberated view indeed. They went further to say, "To students from the South, the college will offer a training peculiarly suited to their needs and

and to social conditions in which they have been reared; and to all young women, from whatever section they may come, the institution will furnish a well-rounded college education preparing them for teaching, fitting them for business professions and qualifying them for a more useful life in the home."⁵ Mentioned herein are three alternatives for life after college. Two of these, teaching and home life, are traditionally feminine occupations. The third alternative, business, provides interesting insights. Already, women were entering the business world and a college degree was a necessary prerequisite. Undoubtedly, the Board of Directors viewed a college education as fundamental to a well-rounded woman; it was a path upon which to embark with serious intentions rather than a stepping stone between secondary education and marriage.

Maintained in connection with the college was the Sweet Briar Academy, the preparatory department of Sweet Briar College. Established in 1906, its purpose was to properly prepare girls for colleges of the first rank. Preparatory schools were few and far between in the early 1900's⁶ and those that did exist were often inadequate in their academic preparation. As stated in the literature of the Academy, its special aim was to "prepare girls thoroughly for Sweet Briar and all leading colleges for women, and to provide a rational, well-ordered education for those who do not wish to go to college."⁷ Dr. Benedict, first President of Sweet Briar College verified the difficulty of finding well prepared students and maintained that this was one reason for the existence of the Academy. It was required of applicants to the Academy that they be 15 years or older and ready for high school work. There were two kinds of courses offered, the college preparatory and the academic course for those who did not wish to go on to college. The first two years of academic study were the same for both courses of study; requirements were English, Algebra, Latin and French or German. The third and fourth years differed as follows:⁸

	<u>College Prep.</u>	<u>Academic</u>
3rd yr.	English	English
	French & German	French & German
	English & Latin	English & Latin

College Prep.
Plane Geometry
Latin-- Cicero

Academic
Elective--2 subjects⁹

4th yr. English
French or German
Ancient History
Latin--Virgil
Science: Physics or Botany

English
French or German
Ancient History
Elective--2 subjects

It may be noted from this that, while all women needed a background in English, Latin, a second language and some history, the college preparatory course was more rigid, demanding science as well as further study in Mathematics and Latin. A more technical curriculum was required for the prospective college students, while the Academic course had room for Music and Art (see note 6), two feminine disciplines. The academic standards of the Academy were strict; upon completion of the college preparatory course, students were granted a certificate which entitled the holders to admission to Vassar, Smith and Wellesley as well as to Sweet Briar College.¹⁰

It is interesting to note that in the early years of the college, Sweet Briar often compared itself to established and respected women's colleges in the desire to be counted among them. In the first college catalog of 1906-1907, the aim of the college was thus stated: "The aim of the school is to be a college of the first rank. The requirements for admission to the collegiate work and the conditions of graduation are high--fully equal to those at Vassar, Bryn Mawr and other colleges of the first rank..."¹¹ This section of the catalog was maintained for two years. In 1908, the comparison to Vassar and Bryn Mawr was omitted as Sweet Briar began to stand on its own merit.

Sweet Briar began with fourteen departments: Philosophy, English, Modern Languages (French and German), Ancient Language, History and Economics, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Geology, Biology, Physiology and Hygiene, Music, Art and Domestic Science.¹² The largest of the departments, surprisingly enough, was Chemistry with ten courses offered while Domestic Science had only four courses.¹³ In 1906, when a woman's place was thought to be in the home,

Sweet Briar would appear to be a rather enlightened place. In 1908, the department of Biblical History and Literature was added while economics was temporarily omitted. The principles of Economics was to be reinstated "as soon as the growth of the advanced classes occasions a demand for them."¹⁴ By 1911, the student demand had apparently grown as Economics was again offered. In 1915, the curriculum expanded slightly as Elementary Italian was offered as a senior elective. In 1917, it was broadened even further. Additions included Elementary Spanish, Advanced Italian, Physical Education and a distinct Psychology department.¹⁵

The Sweet Briar faculty was consistently interested in the students college career, both academic and otherwise. During faculty meetings there was a wide range of topics which included grades, health and social privileges and infractions. The first faculty meeting established a grading system that would be looked upon as severe by today's standards. The traditional A-B-C method was adopted, yet anything below a C or 70% was considered a failing mark.¹⁶ Discussion of library hours was a frequent topic. At one meeting in 1906, "It was suggested that the library be closed at night so as to prevent the girls spending so much time reading periodicals."¹⁷ Although this is not a comparative study, it is difficult to avoid drawing parallels between then and now. This suggestion illustrates the control that the faculty had over how the students spent their time; a control that would be virtually impossible today. Another example of such control was the question of how studying can be prevented on Sunday. It was decided by the faculty that the rest day be changed from Saturday to Monday in order to enable students to study on Monday.¹⁸

The department of Domestic Science is an interesting one, particularly because it is no longer offered at most colleges. Home Economics traditionally evokes images of a woman bustling around the kitchen preparing the family dinner or sitting dutifully at a sewing machine. At the first meeting of the second academic year, the first question brought up for discussion was "whether Domestic Science should be treated as an academic subject."¹⁹ The head of the Domestic

Science department maintained that the amount of work in the course was equal to that of any other department and furthermore that student interest in Domestic Science was generally good. She qualified her justifications by adding that without organic chemistry and biology as prerequisites, the course could not be considered one of collegiate standing. To the non-scientist, this sounds awesome indeed and tends to make one feel somewhat more respectful of those enrolled in Domestic Science. The final decision was that "no student be allowed to take less than three academic subjects exclusive of Domestic Science."²⁰

Academic standards were an ever-present concern of the faculty. One specific issue illustrates this. In 1909 there was a controversy over lowering the units required for admission from 15 to 14. The newly appointed Committee on Entrance Requirements submitted arguments against lowering the number of required units because it would lower the standards and sacrifice the prestige of the college.²¹

The second President of Sweet Briar, Emilie Watts McVea, had her own views on women's education. During her Presidency she published a small pamphlet entitled Why a College Degree? Why a Sweet Briar Degree?²² Dr. McVea poses the question of whether the results of a college education justify the expenditure of the necessary time, strength and money. Her answer is composed of the various justifications for a college education, something she feels is of doubtless merit to all women. One justification is geared to the woman who desires a career; a college education increases earning power. The significance lies in the fact that attention is being paid to women in the work force and that a college degree is almost mandatory in most desirable jobs.

Dr. McVea does not ignore the more traditional woman in her advocacy of college education. Her second point is that a college education contributes to real homemaking. It teaches women to interpret home affairs, to train children in civic responsibility and to become the intellectual comrade of her husband and children. Furthermore, "Upon the foundations of the accurate study of science,

she readily acquires the technical knowledge and skill necessary for the proper management of food and money."²³

Dr. McVea goes further to say that a college degree is the basis for all higher specialization and that fields are open today that had previously been closed to women. Examples of these fields include; Child Welfare, Architecture, Chemical and Biological analysis, Industrial Chemistry and Statistics.²⁴

Dr. McVea's pamphlet is an excellent look at early twentieth century education. Despite certain drawbacks (see note 22) it is illustrative of the fact that while many women were still becoming wives and mothers, there were increasing opportunities for women in the work force.

All the preceding evidence cited is the attitudes of the administration and the faculty. Equally important but less readily found are the attitudes of the students. How did the girls view their education? Perhaps the following excerpt from a dedication to the first graduating class of 1910 entitled "To the Thirty-six" can answer that question.

...dear students...yours was not a life void of all pleasure... though some consider these pleasures²⁵ typical of the true finishing school, we thank you for them, we thank you that we can combine in our college life academic work and the social pleasure which the so called 'finishing schools' enjoy.

But I have not mentioned to you the greatest achievement of our four years here. I have not told you of an event which will take place in June and which will bring pride into the hearts of every student who has lived within these walls...go forth and show to all the world the first fruits of a college whose name is beginning to stand for the highest noblest and best of our native land.²⁶

Jennie Hurt, class of 1911

An obvious sense of pride comes through in Miss Hurt's dedication. Another, perhaps more enlightening piece of writing was also found. It offers a better look at how the students actually viewed their academics.

...Prose composition, analytical geometry, Anglo-saxon and numerous other torments and persecutions must be passed before we reach the goal. Twice a year we felt our courage wane...but fortune smiled upon us and, thanks to a generous use of cram, bluff and

study, we have come safely through the ordeal; we feel in our grasp the much desired A.B.. We realize that the most vital parts of our life at Sweet Briar are not included in catalogs. We have mastered textbooks but textbook lore may leave us tomorrow, aye, even now it is gone, but the development and growth these years have brought us are our possessions now and always.²⁷

The author of this piece refers to academics as "torments" and even says that "textbook lore" has left her mind, yet the benefits of a college education are not merely academic but personal and will remain forever.

On the lighter side is yet another view, a song published in 1913 in the Sweet Briar College Song Book, written by a student from the class of 1912. She refers to both work and play and seems to enjoy both equally.

If You Want to go to College²⁸

If you want to go to college
And you don't know where to go
Just go to dear old Sweet Briar
So say they all who know.
Of course you'll have to study
And burn the midnight oil
But when you're getting knowledge
What do you care for toil.

If you want to go to college
For both the work and play
That place is dear old Sweet Briar
You'll hear the students say.
The best on earth for learning
The best on earth for fun
The best on earth for everything
The best beneath the sun.

Miss Wilson demonstrates a balanced picture of a college education. Her reference to burning the midnight oil rings familiar, even today.

How was women's education viewed in the early twentieth century? The question is not easily answered partially due to the fact that undoubtedly, different individuals have different attitudes toward learning. It seems safe to assume that, to those who chose to attend college, it was a serious enterprise, demanding responsibility but resulting in permanent benefits.

Women were beginning to want representation, not only politically, but in the work force and the academic community. New fields were open to them and a college education was of great help. In a time when the majority of women did not attend college, those who did were there to get an education and not merely to become cultured young ladies.

There were indeed many women who wanted to become homemakers, as illustrated by the interest in Domestic Science. The question of Domestic Science as an academic subject and the fact that the prerequisites were scientifically oriented is proof that women did not go to college to learn how to cook. That could be done at home without the expenditure of much money and time.

The faculty, the administration and the students worked hard to make Sweet Briar a respectable, top ranking college and took pride in the fact that it was. Mary K. Benedict expresses both the effort and the pride when she says,

Our second year Katharine Wilson came as a freshman and the following year she went to Vassar as a full-fledged sophomore... there was no trouble at any time in having our work accepted with full credit by other colleges and universities...We probably leaned over backward in our determination to stand with colleges of the first rank.²⁹

Because Dr. Benedict and other men and women like her had that determination, women's colleges were looked upon not as finishing schools but as places of higher learning that prepared the graduate for any and all walks of life, whether she chose to be a devoted wife and mother or a suffragette.

It may be said that a college education increases the personal joy of living. Emilie W. McVea put it aptly when she said of the college educated woman, "She need never lack friends, she need never lack occupation"³⁰

Bibliography

All materials listed below can be found in the Sweet Briar archive section of the rare book room with the exception of the Faculty Minutes which can be found in the work room of the rare book room Mary Helen Cochran Library, Sweet Briar College.

Benedict, Mary K. "Sweet Briar 1906-1916", Alumnae News, Dec. 1937. This article by the first president of Sweet Briar shows the pride felt in Sweet Briar's growing status as a college of the first rank.

McVea, Emilie W. Why a College Degree? Why a Sweet Briar Degree? Written between 1916 and 1925 during the second presidency of Dr. McVea, this pamphlet offers a timely look at how college education was viewed in general.

Stohlman, Martha Lou Lemmon. The Story of Sweet Briar College. Princeton University Press, Princeton. (1956). Not a prime example of historical research but fun reading.

Wilson, Loulie. "If You Want to go to College" Sweet Briar College Song Bbok, (1913) A view of College life through the eyes of a student.

Faculty Minutes, demonstrated the concern of the faculty toward maintaining high standards. Entries used: Oct. 24, 1906
Dec, 7, 1906
Sept. 21, 1907
Nov. 8, 1907
Jan. 15, 1909

College Catalogs--years 1906-1907 to 1917-1918, provided information about the public aim of the college as well as the courses offered.

Copy of Charter of Sweet Briar Institute and of the amendments to said Charter. (1901) stated Indiana Fletcher Williams purpose in founding the college.

Sweet Briar Prospectus--Sweet Briar Institute (1906) illustrated the intention of the Board of Directors.

Sweet Briar Academy pamphlets 1915-1916 and 1916-1917 stated the reasons for the Academy and the necessity of proper training for those who wished entrance to Sweet Briar College.

Briar Patch 1910. Two pieces in particular gave some clue as to how the students viewed their academic life.

Briar Patch 1912, was consulted to find out if the author of the song was a student.

All sources cited above were prepared for publication with the exception of the Faculty minutes. It must therefore be noted that a possible bias exists. Nevertheless, the documents are of merit in that they offer insights into the time period under surveillance.

Notes

²³Emilie Watts McVea, Why a College Degree? Why a Sweet Briar Degree?
c.1916-1925, p.3

²⁴Ibid. p. 4

²⁵The "pleasures" included the crowning of the May Queen, Glee Club, Choir

²⁶Jennie Hurt, "To the thirty-six" Briar Patch, 1910 p. 13-16

²⁷Historian, "Senior History", Briar Patch, 1910, p. 23

Although the piece is merely signed Historian, it may be assumed that it was written by a student because of the use of "we" in relation to the studies.

²⁸Loulie Wilson, "If You want to go to College", Sweet Briar College Song Book, (1913) p. 10

²⁹Mary K. Benedict, "Sweet Briar 1906-1916", Alumnae News, Dec., 1937
p. 10

³⁰Emilie Watts McVea, Why a College Degree? Why a Sweet Briar Degree?
c. 1916-1925, p. 5

Notes

¹Martha Lou Lemmon Stohlman, The Story of Sweet Briar College. Princeton University Press, Princeton. (1956) p.11
The validity of the book must be questioned because of the lack of historical documentation.

²Copy of Charter of Sweet Briar Institute and of the Amendments to said Charter (1901) p.2

³College Catalog (1913-1914) p. 14

⁴Sweet Briar College Prospectus; Sweet Briar Institute (1906) p. 15

⁵Ibid. p. 6

⁶Girls came to Sweet Briar Academy from as far away as Pa., NY, Idaho, Il., Texas and Mexico.

⁷Sweet Briar Academy pamphlet (1916-1917) p. 10

⁸Ibid. (1915-1916) p. 8-9

⁹Electives were chosen from German, French, Latin, Mathematics, Science, Music or Art.

¹⁰Sweet Briar Academy pamphlet (1915-1916) p. 10

¹¹College Catalog. (1906-1907) p. 14

¹²Ibid. p. 34-55

¹³The average number of courses offered for all departments was six.

¹⁴College Catalog. (1908-1909) p. 45

¹⁵Psychology had previously been offered under the philosophy department.

¹⁶Faculty Minutes. Oct. 24, 1906 p.11

¹⁷Ibid. Dec. 7, 1907, p.19

¹⁸Ibid. Nov. 8, 1909, p.59

¹⁹Ibid. Sept. 21, 1907, p 47

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid. Jan. 15, 1909, p. 88

²²The exact date of this document is unknown but can be approximated sometime between the years 1916-1925, the term of Dr. McVea's presidency. Its objectivity must be questioned because of the nature of the document--obviously it was published as propaganda to lure students to Sweet Briar.