

Overcoming Strife With Sisterhood

In The 1960's

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Doing Sweet Briar History

Chavigny

Traditions have always played a large role in Sweet Briar College's long and rich history, it's a part of what makes the college so unique and strong. Since the beginning of women's colleges, traditions have been "significant...[in] helping women find places and status in a public, nondomestic world".¹ While their male counterparts were being educated in a way that allowed them to enter society with power, women had to create a means of learning this attribute. Traditions were a woman's way of "acquiring [an] education, skills, organization expertise and a voice in social institutions."² It allowed them to create a fair hierarchy among the student body without immediately being overtaken by the male voice.

These traditions do not appear today in the same hierarchical forms as those in the past. The pressures of external and internal forces have changed them and molded them to become ways of bonding us together. The young women of Sweet Briar College are just one example of the bond these traditions can make. The sisterhood on campus during the Vietnam War and during the integration of the college, both during the 1960's, show us just how strong that bond was.

¹ Gordon, Lynn D. "Introduction and Conclusion." In *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

² Gordon, Lynn D. "Introduction and Conclusion." In *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

Amy McCandless argues that even up until the late 1930's southern women were held to strict standards including restrictions on attire, outings, and even *males*. She calls this standard the pedestal.³ After analyzing scores of editions of *The Briar Patch* from the 1930's up through the mid 1970's, it is clear that a change was happening. Beginning with the mid-to-late 1960's these women began to move away from this pedestal she describes.⁴ McCandless also discusses the importance of traditions in all-women's colleges in both the North and the South. All while recognizing that southern women's colleges held onto these ideologies longer than their northern counterparts. This meant that traditions had more time to evolve to meet the needs of those women as the years went on, ultimately keeping the sisterhood alive.

May Day is just one example of an important tradition that was held closer to the heart of the women in the south. While northern colleges were making way for new ideas, colleges in the south still clung to the ideas of the past. For example, when May Day disappears from the 1969 *Briar Patch*, it is clear some radical changes are occurring within the college.⁵ The changes are also apparent in the appearances of the women of Sweet Briar during this time span. Girls are growing their hair past the shoulders, skirts are shorter than the knee, and photographs are clearly taken in a more

³McCandless, Amy. "'Preserving the Pedestal: Restrictions on Social Life at Southern Colleges for Women 1920-1940'" *History of Higher Education Annual 7* (1987): 45-67.

⁴ "Sweet Briar College Briar Patch Yearbooks." : Free Texts : Download & Streaming : Internet Archive. Accessed December 16, 2015.
[https://archive.org/details/sweetbriarcollege?&and\[\]=briar+patch](https://archive.org/details/sweetbriarcollege?&and[]=briar+patch).

⁵ "Sweet Briar College Briar Patch Yearbooks." : Free Texts : Download & Streaming : Internet Archive. Accessed December 16, 2015.
[https://archive.org/details/sweetbriarcollege?&and\[\]=briar+patch](https://archive.org/details/sweetbriarcollege?&and[]=briar+patch).

casual manner. All indicators that change was occurring for these women within the college.

The 1960's was a trying, yet progressive time period for not only the students within the Sweet Briar College community, but also in the world. The Vietnam War was bringing about reform in many aspects of American life. Those in support of the war were worried about losing their way of life stuck in tradition and value. Those with the anti-war movement wished to challenge the typical way of living, including traditions and the typical values of families across America.⁶ When the conflict that the Vietnam War created made its way into Sweet Briar, there certainly wasn't a lack of opinion on the subject. Sweet Briar was filled with anti-war supporters, as well as many who did support the war. These women included Mimi Fahs who came to Sweet Briar as a freshman in 1968 plastering anti-war posters to her walls as she moved in⁷. In a poll taken by Virginia college students in March of 1969 about 53.9% said that they were in support of the Vietnam War.⁸ When a mock vote was held at Sweet Briar in November of 1968 Richard Nixon came out ahead with 72.2% of the votes on campus.⁹ These statistics prove that while the majority of colleges in Virginia were averaging around

⁶ Farber, David R., and Eric Foner. 1994. *The age of great dreams: America in the 1960s*. New York: Hill and Wang. Chapter 8.

⁷ Green, Penelope. "The Independent Women of Sweet Briar." *The New York Times*. April 22, 2015. Accessed December 15, 2015.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/23/fashion/the-independent-women-of-sweet-briar.html>.

⁸ Martin, Marilyn. "Va. College Students Respond To Poll, Show 53.9% Support For Vietnam War." *News Archives of SBC*. March 7, 1969. Accessed December 15, 2015.

http://newsarchive.sbc.edu/News_1964-09_TO_1969-10/0484.jpg.

⁹ Medaglia, Liz. "Nixon Tops List In Presidential Poll." *News Archives of SBC*. November 1, 1968. Accessed December 15, 2015. http://newsarchive.sbc.edu/News_1964-09_TO_1969-10/0435.jpg.

50% in views on Vietnam, Sweet Briar's mock vote suggests that a good deal of women on campus were against the war. Yet Sweet Briar never fell apart, there is no evidence of these women going against one another because of these opinions. In fact they supported one another, including their sisters at other women's colleges in the area.

The off campus politics of the world also made their way onto campus, such as drug laws. Those in support of drug usage often believed in the support of "beloved community," which sought to unify those around them and avoid the pressures of their lives and the world.¹⁰ The drug culture on campus can be assumed by looking at many Sweet Briar newspapers from the late 1960's onward. These often include articles that talk about drug busts on other college campuses in the area such as Hollins University in Lynchburg.

In the article "*Hey You Guys, You Better Ditch Your Stuff...*" written in March of 1969, Susan Scanlan depicts drug busts happening all around and at Sweet Briar during the time of the Vietnam War.¹¹ Although drug busts may have been a preventative measure, it also points to the fact that administration was taking notice of the changes in attitude on campus. They must have felt that there already was a prevalent problem on campus, or they were working to prevent such a problem.

¹⁰ Farber, David R., and Eric Foner. 1994. *The age of great dreams: America in the 1960s*. New York: Hill and Wang. Chapter 8.

¹¹ Scanlan, Susan. "'Hey You Guys, You Better Ditch Your Stuff...'" News Archives of SBC. March 21, 1969. Accessed December 15, 2015. [http://newsarchive.sbc.edu/News 1964-09 TO 1969-10/0494.jpg](http://newsarchive.sbc.edu/News%201964-09%20TO%201969-10/0494.jpg).

Browsing further through *The Briar Patch* seems to point in the direction of there already being a problem on campus.¹² It can be concluded that a prevalent drug culture on campus would include a desire for community for the student body, who already valued sisterhood so dearly.

Another force of strife on campus was integration. Sweet Briar began its journey towards integration in August of 1964. The first step of this happened when they set out to change Indiana Fletchers will to include all women, not just those of white race. By the year 1966 Sweet Briar College had admitted its first African American student. She described the attitude on campus as friendly, and then goes on to state that “they were well-bred and not the type to be ugly”.¹³ It seems that even during a time of complete uncertainty for these white women, many who had “no experience with black peers” were welcoming of this new experience.¹⁴ What should have caused even more tension actually bonded together this group of women.

The difference at Sweet Briar College was that even though the strong women of the college all held very different opinions on such a topic, they still believed in

¹² "Sweet Briar College Briar Patch Yearbooks." : Free Texts : Download & Streaming : Internet Archive. Accessed December 16, 2015.

[https://archive.org/details/sweetbriarcollege?&and\[\]=briar patch](https://archive.org/details/sweetbriarcollege?&and[]=briar+patch).

¹³"Black and White: Sweet Briar's Journey beyond Color Lines." NewsAdvance.com. March 2, 2014. Accessed December 15, 2015.

http://www.newsadvance.com/news/local/black-and-white-sweet-briar-s-journey-beyond-color-lines/article_4d9317fe-a196-11e3-8921-0017a43b2370.html.

¹⁴ "Black and White: Sweet Briar's Journey beyond Color Lines." NewsAdvance.com. March 2, 2014. Accessed December 15, 2015.

http://www.newsadvance.com/news/local/black-and-white-sweet-briar-s-journey-beyond-color-lines/article_4d9317fe-a196-11e3-8921-0017a43b2370.html.

sisterhood. Seeing that strife was splitting the world around them, the women of Sweet Briar banded together to support one another in all that they did. These strife causing factors actually allowed for the students to become closer to one another, and the traditions of today reflect that. The unity that witheld during the strife of the 1960's can be seen even to this day.

Annotated Bibliography:

Gordon, Lynn D. "Introduction and Conclusion." In *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

-This source provided background information on the history of women's college traditions and the importance they played in sisterhood.

McCandless, Amy. "'Preserving the Pedestal: Restrictions on Social Life at Southern Colleges for Women 1920-1940'" *History of Higher Education Annual 7* (1987): 45-67.

-McCandless also provided background information on southern women's colleges as well as the standards of the time period for young women.

Sweet Briar College Briar Patch Yearbooks." : Free Texts : Download & Streaming : Internet Archive. Accessed December 16, 2015. (1960-1972)

-The Briar Patch yearbooks give us a visual of the changes happening during the time period, in dress, hair, layouts, pictures, etc.

Green, Penelope. "The Independent Women of Sweet Briar." *The New York Times*. April 22, 2015. Accessed December 15, 2015.

-Provides a quote from an alumnae interview about Sweet Briar students being opposed to the war in Vietnam

Martin, Marilyn. "Va. College Students Respond To Poll, Show 53.9% Support For Vietnam War." *News Archives of SBC*. March 7, 1969. Accessed December 15, 2015. http://newsarchive.sbc.edu/News_1964-09_TO_1969-10/0484.jpg.

-This poll included Sweet Briar College. This also surveyed the tolerance of drugs, most were in favor of legalizing marijuana and lowering the voting age to 18.

Medaglia, Liz. "Nixon Tops List In Presidential Poll." *News Archives of SBC*. November 1, 1968. Accessed December 15, 2015. http://newsarchive.sbc.edu/News_1964-09_TO_1969-10/0435.jpg.

-This source provides direct evidence of the split views on campus. The split in votes during the Presidential Poll at Sweet Briar is clear in this article.

Farber, David R., and Eric Foner. 1994. *The age of great dreams: America in the 1960s*. New York: Hill and Wang. Chapter 8.

-Farber provided background information on the Vietnam War and typical American life and views in the 1960's.

Scanlan, Susan. "'Hey You Guys, You Better Ditch Your Stuff...'" News Archives of SBC. March 21, 1969. Accessed December 15, 2015. [http://newsarchive.sbc.edu/News 1964-09 TO 1969-10/0494.jpg](http://newsarchive.sbc.edu/News%201964-09%20TO%201969-10/0494.jpg).

-Scanlan gave evidence of the drug culture on campus with her article on drug busts, suggesting that drugs were indeed on campus during the 1960's.

"Black and White: Sweet Briar's Journey beyond Color Lines." NewsAdvance.com. March 2, 2014. Accessed December 15, 2015.

-Source provides background on the Sweet Briar movement for Civil Rights as well as quotes from our first African American student who notices our sisterhood on campus.