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Demise of the Pedestal Ideology: Social Tension and Cultural Conflict on Campus

1968-1972

The 1960s and 1970s were a time of social upheaval on the otherwise quiet, rural campus of Sweet Briar College in Central Virginia. By the mid-sixties, the women of the southern college were divided between those who wished to “preserve the pedestal” and those who wished to be respected as more than women bred for marriage, but as educated leaders and career-ambitious individuals. Historian Amy McCandless describes this “pedestal” culture at Southern women’s colleges as a set of standards in both the social and academic realm. She states, “Student government, social regulations, extra-curricular activities, and even college architecture [that] reflected the desire of educators and to parents to preserve the purity, beauty, and grace of Southern womanhood (McCandless 45).” This divide in the student body, in response to differing opinions regarding larger cultural changes such as war and woman’s place in society, caused social tension on campus.

Kate Schlech, class of 1970, when asked about the social tension on campus or cultural changes in the greater world, and how the latter may have affected the social atmosphere, responded, “So, the really interesting question is the underlying cause of all of this turmoil and rebellion—how much of it was directed at Sweet Briar versus how much at the wider world and its larger problems? Very hard to say—I rather suspect that we took on the school because

relatively speaking, it was lower hanging fruit--we could actually get something done there. We weren't so sure we could end the war or give Blacks equal rights or achieve some of the other larger goals we had in mind (Questions For Sweet Briar History Class, Schlech)."

Ann Gateley, also class of 1970, described the social environment on campus as highly conservative and Protestant, "No students I knew received news papers. Perhaps some went to the library. Only a few TV's were available. Smokers might have one. News was at an 'inconvenient' time of day.... we were dining for gods sake! Most of the student body was white, middle class, and Republican. Protestant as well. I do not know if there was a campus poll, but the assumption was that the vast majority of the students voted for Nixon in 1968. If you look at the year book pictures, the Young Republicans out number the Young Democrats 3 to 1 ("Questions For Sweet Briar History Class" Gateley)."

Were the late sixties and early seventies the end of the Southern women's college "pedestal" and what led to such changes? On campus this group was represented by women who wished for the gentility of the South and the traditional gender roles to remain largely the same, whilst the others pushed for a campus more focused on careers, academics, and social problems such as equality (both in gender and race) and the anti-war movement. The traditional groups can be represented and summarized by the set that participated in May Day -- a tradition that disappeared in 1969. The second, more progressive set, included Kate and Ann. They recalled on campus signs of protest, such as wearing armbands over their robes in solidarity for the Kent State shootings. The external causes, the cultural events and changes that led to this divide, were many. Schlech recalls, "By the same token, to some extent the whole student movement was like a wildfire—it just spread and spread and sooner or later it was going to arrive at Sweet Briar. And it did. I can't say that when I arrived at Sweet Briar in Fall 1966 I was a rebel—I had a

pretty conservative upbringing and was, generally speaking, a rule follower. But we also arrived carrying some cultural baggage. My generation had been badly shaken by John F Kennedy's assassination in late 1963, we were very tuned in to politics, were paying very close attention to the voting rights marches, and were watching our own brothers get their draft notices to go to war even though they were still too young to vote or buy a beer. When Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., heroes to so many, were both assassinated in 1968, it was as if the world was falling apart around us. We needed, not just wanted, to try and change all that (Schlech)."

On the same note, Gateley agreed, "However, as our guy friends, brothers, and sweethearts were vulnerable to the draft I think we became more aware of the Vietnam conflict (the United States had only entered in 1965)." She mentions that antiwar songs seemed to have more of an influence than Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination or the founding of the National Organization for Women ("Fw: Questions For Sweet Briar History Class: Second Installment at the top!" Gateley).

Gateley goes on to talk about another group on campus -- the faculty. She recalled, "The faculty were huge 'prime movers' of our nascent national awareness along with popular music. We started college with beach music and Motown and by the end of my junior year we had Woodstock. Afterwards, Dylan's 'Blowing in the Wind' and Seeger's 'Give Peace a Chance' were anthem's wafting across campus in the Spring of 1970 ("Questions For Sweet Briar History Class" Gateley)."

The pedestal ideology was crumbling, no matter what the cause. The pedestal's influence diminished drastically in the 1969-1970 class year edition of the Sweet Briar College Student's Handbook (Edinger, Harris, Williams). The Handbook once had extensive regulations set for dress code and social conduct, but the dress code and social conduct regulations, such as

visitation policies, were more relaxed (McLaughlin). Another notable date that hints to the amount of social tension on campus is the disappearance of May Court in 1969. When asked about the how the social event was regarded from the view point of the more socially progressive students, Schlech responds, “I favored getting rid of May Day—I thought at the time that it was vapid and shallow, especially given that there was so much going on in the world that was so important and more worthy of our energy—Civil Rights, anti-war, etc. I mean really, a bunch of pretty girls all in white dancing around in the Dell letting the guys ogle at them?!? Are you KIDDING me?? That’s the altruistic spin and we really did believe it. But May Day was also emblematic of a very definite split on the campus between those who were pretty, more well-to-do, and dressed in the finest matched sweater sets and Villager skirts, with color coordinated Papagallos, and those who were not. On some level, those of us who were “nots,” (self included), were likely jealous of those who were. And unquestionably, that was a factor in our getting rid of the dress code altogether. May Day had nothing directly to do with marriagiability, but it did have a certain “meat market” feel. Marriagiability was much more directly a factor in the ring game (which we never did get rid of entirely, I don’t think) which celebrated engagements among seniors (of course no married students were allowed at SBC, except one or two turning point local gals, so this was all seniors getting ready to leave) (Schlech).”

Gateley had a similar opinion, referring to the tradition as the “pretty club” (“Installments” Gateley). There was a definite divide between the proprietors of tradition and those who favored progression on campus during this time. The faculty were largely traditionalist and Student Government was not trusted. So much so that an underground newspaper surfaced, publishing articles that would not appear in the college newspaper (Schlech).

Regarding the Southern women's college pedestal, Sweet Briar was considered fairly behind when it came to enacting social change on campus. The college was lagging a few years behind both Hollins University and Randolph-Macon Women's College in regards to visitation policies and rules concerning the time students spent off-campus (Schlech). It is difficult to pin point the college as the final demise of the metaphorical pedestal, as Converse College, a secular women's college in South Carolina, still has visitation hours ("Residential Life").

The fall of the pedestal might have been related the diversity of students that began to attend college. Sweet Briar was no longer a school catering to the elite of the South. Kate Schlech graduated from high school in Maryland, but had spent her youth traveling abroad with her military family. Ann Gateley came from Texas and a progressive boarding school. With the diversity increasing the college no longer served only southern women, and therefore had to change to accommodate a new student body. Without further extensive research into other similar women's colleges one can not conclude how progressive or traditional Sweet Briar was. Furthermore, the fall of the pedestal at one college may have been illustrated by something different than what occurred at Sweet Briar.

One thing is clear: the divide and tension that occurred in student body, still weighs heavily on the alumnae. Evident in e-mail correspondences, the language chosen illustrates a ferocity of opinion still felt four decades later. Whether the pedestal fell at Sweet Briar during the sixties, seventies, or sometime later, these years were vital as a catalyst for change and a microcosm of progressive youth culture that was sweeping across the United States.

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