

THE INTEGRATION OF SWEET BRIAR;
THE SWEET BRIAR COLLEGE CASE
1963-1967

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Doing Sweet Briar History
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"I Pledge..."-
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Throughout the mid-1960's, Sweet Briar College was involved in legal action that would change its face forever. During this time, the Civil Rights movement was at full steam, and the question of racial equality was of major importance all over the country. At Sweet Briar, it wasn't simply a question, it was a problem. The college was restricted to whites, and it took nearly four years in court to eliminate that restriction. This paper is a study of that legal action, as well as the statements and opinions of those in the Sweet Briar community and surrounding area..

The Founding of Sweet Briar College was due to two people - James Henry Williams and his wife Indiana Fletcher Williams. In 1885, four years before his death, James Williams drew his will, which said:

It is my wish that my wife should by deed or will, secure the ultimate appropriation of my estate, in trust for the foundation and maintenance of a school or seminary...as a memorial of our deceased daughter Daisy Williams. This wish however is to be regarded simply as an expression of my desire and not as a binding direction...¹

At the death of her husband in 1889, Indiana Fletcher Williams had her own will drawn, which stated:

I give and devise all my plantation and tract of land known as Sweet Briar plantation, situated in said Amherst County, Virginia...and various other tracts of land, to four trustees. I direct the said trustees forthwith after my decease to procure the incorporation in the state of Virginia of a corporation to be called 'The Sweet Briar Institute' - The said corporation shall with suitable dispatch establish, and shall maintain and carry on upon the said plantation, a school or seminary to be known as the 'Sweet Briar Institute', for the education of white girls and young women.²

One year later, in 1900, Indiana Williams died, and left her plantation under the direction of the four trustees. In the fall of 1906, Sweet Briar College opened its doors to the first of its students.

During the 1950's, the United States began to undergo a series of changes, the most prominent of which concerned the problem of racial equality. Sweet Briar felt these changes, but due to the restrictive clause in Indiana Williams' will - 'for the education of white girls and young women' - the college was unable to legally keep up with the rest of America. Officially, the decision to contest the will was made by the Board of Overseers on November 2, 1963³, but the idea had already taken root in many students' and faculty members' minds at least as early as April the same year. On April 26, 1963, 124 students signed a petition stating that any qualified applicant, regardless of race, should be considered for admittance to Sweet Briar. On October 8, 1963, 59 faculty members expressed their desire for an open admissions policy in a letter to Anne Gary Pannell, President of the College at the time.⁴ The views expressed by the students and faculty were in concurrence with the administration and the Board, which was part of the reason why the decision was made to contest the will. All involved felt that the quality of education would decline if the college were not to eliminate its restrictions. It was felt that quality professors would not want to teach at Sweet Briar, and that students would not receive a sound education - an education for reality.

On August 17, 1964 Sweet Briar College, after much deliberation by the Board of Directors and Overseers, as well as the administration, filed suit in Amherst Circuit Court asking for

the right to accept anyone with the proper qualifications to Sweet Briar.

Frank G. Davidson, Jr. and Thomas S. Currier, the legal counsel representing Sweet Briar throughout the case, felt that the original intent of Indiana Williams' will was not to bar blacks from entrance to the college, but merely, as the law required at the time, to specify one race or the other. The main argument for Sweet Briar's case was a sentence in Indiana's will that both the Board and the legal counsel thought was the single most important sentiment expressed in the will.

The general scope and object of the school shall be to impart to its students such education in sound learning, and such physical, moral and religious training as shall, in the judgement of the directors, best fit them to be useful members of society.⁵

It was that idea, that the directors should give the students the best education the college could offer, which Mr. Davidson and Mr. Currier chose to base their case on. However, the Attorney General for Virginia did not read the will in the same light. Two weeks after the request was filed, the Attorney General returned an answer which said that the wording of the will was clear - the college was founded for the education of white girls and young women.

Since Sweet Briar had not proven that circumstances had changed since the will was originally drawn, the Attorney General could not grant the college either of the alternatives that it had wanted. The first option has already been mentioned - that the objective of Indiana Williams could only be carried out if any qualified person were to be admitted, regardless of race. The second option that Sweet Briar would have accepted was to

eliminate the word 'white' from the will altogether. Since neither alternative had been accepted by the Attorney General, Sweet Briar went back to court.

In December of 1964, full arguments were presented to Judge C.G. Quesenbery in the District Court of Virginia. He took the case under advisement and six months later, on June 3, 1965, returned a verdict - Sweet Briar could not admit black students to the college because Indiana Williams had specified white in her will. Judge Quesenbery seemed to think that Sweet Briar was acting on the will at that time simply because of the emotions of the 1960's. "The spirit of the times, or we might better say the hysteria of the times, has probably generated the thinking of the board in this case..."⁶ Once again, Sweet Briar was thwarted in its efforts to eliminate the racial restrictions set up by its founder.

Eight days after Judge Quesenbery's verdict, the Board met and voted, without reservation, to continue with the case until "its ultimate conclusion"⁷. The Board had the complete agreement of the faculty who had, in March of 1964, made their feelings known during a special meeting. The faculty stated that their committee

endorses without reservation the action taken by the Board of Directors to employ legal counsel 'to take whatever legal action may be necessary to secure a judicial determination... whether we may...admit qualified persons to Sweet Briar College regardless of race'.⁸

The fact that the faculty was in accord with the Board's wishes was an extra benefit that served to help Sweet Briar's case in court immensely.

Not all those associated with the Sweet Briar community felt

the same as the faculty. Shortly after Sweet Briar decided to comply with the Civil Rights Act in June of 1965, Mrs. W.L. Lyons Brown, a member of the Board of Overseers for 24 years, decided to resign from her position in protest. She stated that

To violate the trust which we assumed when we became members of the board of overseers ...particularly just one week after the court of our own selection had ruled on the matter, and to disregard a decision of the court without seeking a review of that decision, in order to secure federal funds...is to me unthinkable.⁹

It was the idea that Sweet Briar seemed to have so blatantly disregarded the court in complying with the 1964 Civil Rights Act that offended Mrs. Brown and many like her. It should be noted though that Mrs. Brown did not attend the Board meeting when the decision was made concerning the Civil Rights Act.¹⁰

From June of 1965 to April of 1966, the Attorney General for Amherst County went to court trying to have Judge Quesenbery dismiss Sweet Briar's case. His argument was that "Sweet Briar did not come into court with clean hands or good faith". He felt that the college was simply out for federal money, and not just action on its presumed morals.¹¹ The case for dismissal was denied by Judge Quesenbery, but the sentiments expressed by the Attorney General were similar to those expressed often by others throughout the area. An editorial printed in the Lynchburg News on May 8, 1966 voiced the same general opinion that the Attorney General had. It said Sweet Briar was trying to change the will simply at the whim of the Directors, without any real thought for the original desire of Indiana Williams.¹² This idea was frequently repeated throughout the case by those in and around the Sweet Briar community, as well as by those arguing against

the case.

On April 25, 1966, Sweet Briar took its case to the United States District Court and immediately received a temporary injunction which kept the Attorney General of Virginia from enforcing the racial restriction in Indiana Williams' will.¹³ On the advice of its legal counsel, Sweet Briar made a statement which was the first of its kind in the school's history. On May 28, 1966, the college stated "that a policy of admissions...unrestricted as to race, creed or color...is adopted and confirmed".¹⁴ Sweet Briar then went back to the United States District Court in July to have the temporary injunction previously given them made permanent. The three-judge panel took five months to come to a decision, and when they were done, they had decided nothing. The judges had abstained from making a decision, so in effect, they had sent Sweet Briar's case back to the state court.

During the five month period of time while the District Court judges were trying to come to a decision, Sweet Briar decided it was time to act on the temporary injunction previously given to them. On August 31, 1966, the college admitted its first black student. Marshalyn Yeargin, a junior transfer from Bennett College, was accepted for admittance to Sweet Briar. Apparently, Miss Yeargin knew of the legal action being taken by the college at the time, but not the extent that it was being taken to. In an interview printed in the Washington Post on September 3, 1966, Miss Yeargin said that she "didn't figure there was going to be any big fuss" and that "knowing I would be the first Negro accepted...I feel a little more excited about going there now".¹⁵ Many people voiced their opinions on the

decision, but primarily all, according to the college, were favorable.

In January of 1967, Sweet Briar took its final step in its case to admit blacks to the college. The college's legal counsel appealed the previously handed down decision of the state court to the United States Supreme Court. On May 29, the Supreme Court reversed the decision of the District Court, requiring them to come to a decision, instead of abstain as they had done earlier. Immediately, a verdict was handed down. The District Court of Virginia ruled that Sweet Briar must be allowed to admit blacks, even though Indiana Williams' will had specified 'white', because the state cannot require compliance with the racial restriction because it would constitute state action barred by the Fourteenth Amendment.¹⁶ So, on July 17, 1967, the three-judge panel of the United States District Court of Virginia

by unanimous decision permanently enjoined the Attorney General of Virginia, the Commonwealth's Attorney of Amherst County, and their successors in office, from seeking to enforce the racial restriction on Sweet Briar.¹⁷

Finally, after nearly four years of deliberation both in and out of court, Sweet Briar College accomplished what it had set out to do. The first black student had entered its doors legally, setting a precedent for others to follow. The will of Indiana Fletcher Williams had remained intact, and the college's Board of Directors had done what they felt Indiana intended when she left her plantation to the four original Trustees. Sweet Briar was still an outstanding women's college, and the original purpose of James and Indiana Williams' will was still being adhered to:

It shall be the general scope and object of the school to impart to its students such an education in sound learning, and such physical, moral and religious training as shall, in the judgement of the Directors, best fit them to be useful members of society.¹⁸

Endnotes

- ¹The Sweet Briar College Case: 1963-1967, p.3.
- ²The Sweet Briar College Case: 1963-1967, p.3.
- ³Press release from Martha von Briesen in The Sweet Briar College Case box, Nov. 2, 1963.
- ⁴Student and Faculty petitions in The Sweet Briar College Case box, April 26 and October 8, 1963.
- ⁵The Sweet Briar College Case: 1963-1967, p.4.
- ⁶Lynchburg News Article, June 5, 1965.
- ⁷The Sweet Briar College Case: 1963-1967, p.7.
- ⁸Faculty Minutes, March 19, 1964.
- ⁹Lynchburg News Article, July 4, 1965.
- ¹⁰Alumni Council Statement by Martha von Briesen in The Sweet Briar College Case box, October 13, 1965.
- ¹¹Lynchburg News Article, October 12, 1965.
- ¹²Lynchburg News Article, May 8, 1966.
- ¹³The Sweet Briar College Case: 1963-1967, p.8.
- ¹⁴The Sweet Briar College Case: 1963-1967, p.9.
- ¹⁵Washington Post Article, September 3, 1966.
- ¹⁶Decision of United States District Court, July 14, 1967, found in The Sweet Briar College Case: 1963-1967.
- ¹⁷The Sweet Briar College Case: 1963-1967, p.10.
- ¹⁸The Sweet Briar College Case: 1963-1967, p.4.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

The Sweet Briar College Case: 1963-1967

A pamphlet, published by Sweet Briar in 1968, detailing the legal action taken by the college to break the will of Indiana Fletcher Williams in order to admit and graduate blacks. Very helpful as a condensed version of the case. Located in Room 2 on right side of room. On fourth shelf from floor in a box labelled "SBC Case".

Miscellaneous Newspaper Clippings from 1963-1968

Four scrapbooks containing all clippings from area and other newspapers concerning anything about Sweet Briar between 1963 and 1968. Includes articles and letters giving descriptions and reactions to the SBC Case. Located in Room 2 on left side of room. On second shelf from floor in notebooks labelled "scrapbooks".

Faculty Minutes: 1960-1970

Contains the minutes of every faculty meeting held during that period of time. Limited information on SBC Case, except for faculty opinions. Located in Room 1 on middle shelf in manilla folder labelled "Faculty Minutes: 1960-1970".

Box labelled "SBC Case" Collected by Martha von Briesen

Contains notes, press releases, student and faculty petitions, statements, speeches and correspondence all relating to the SBC Case between 1963 and 1968. Located in Room 2 on the right side of the room. On third shelf from the floor in grey box labelled "SBC Case".

Secondary Sources

The Story of Sweet Briar College

Written by Martha Lou Lemmon Stohlman in 1958, and published by the Alumnae Association. A history of Sweet Briar detailing the founding of SBC, and continuing until 1956. Includes the history of the Fletcher family, as well as photographs taken at Sweet Briar during the first half of the century. Located in Room 2 on the left side of the room on upper shelf with yearbooks.