

Up Stairs Down Stairs:

Hierarchy and Tradition at Sweet Briar College, 1932 to 1945

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Hierarchy is present in every culture, society, and community and functions as a means of assigning individuals their status and importance. One method of gaining such status is through rites of passage. According to author and respected anthropologist Victor Turner, rites of passage tend to happen, "...where change is bound up with biological", i.e., development or maturation, "... and meteorological rhythms and recurrences...and would include in its meaning such social constancies as legal status, profession, office or calling, rank or degree."¹

Although Turner developed his theories in the late sixties, they are still widely accepted today. Furthermore, it is reasonable to find them as meaningful in deducing and explaining the rites of passage prevalent in American culture during the late nineteen thirties to early forties as then. In American culture, one rite of passage used to gain status is a college degree. A young man or woman is seen entering college as an adolescent and emerges as an adult, capable of running his or her own life. During college, many small rites of passage move each student along the path to adulthood.

At Sweet Briar College, these small rites of passage are present in the form of traditions. Sweet Briar has been rooted in traditions since its founding. From 1935 to 1940, several Sweet Briar traditions dealt with gaining and preserving status as well as placing distinct boundaries between classes. Between 1940 and 1945, the hierarchical aspects of Sweet Briar's traditions were removed through a series of decisions by both the student body and administration. Ultimately, the institution refocused itself on the whole four-year college experience as a single rite of passage. Following this shift,

¹Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (New York: University of Cornell Press, 1967), 93.

traditions were used more to create a cohesive community than to mark different levels of scholastic achievement or tenure.

How did this change take place? Why did the traditions change? Who asked for the change? To answer these questions one needs to examine the traditions, as well as when and how they were practiced. One can follow these trends and their timing by reading the *Students' Handbook*, *The Sweet Briar News*, and *The Briar Patch*, which is Sweet Briars' yearbook. Reading these sources, one can appreciate what was taking place on campus and how the hierarchy between classes changed over time.

From the early 1930s to the mid 1940s societal gender norms limited the ways in which women could gain and demonstrate their social status. In 1932 the women of Sweet Briar College who had been practicing class traditions since the school's founding in 1906, made their traditions official when they recorded them in the new "Traditions" section of the *Student's Handbook*. This section of the handbook originally listed seven traditions, "a" through "g", which ranged from observing class spots to learning the school song. The "Traditions" were as follows:

"(a) The Freshmen are requested not to sit upon the Golden Stairs. (b) The Freshman are requested not to sit upon the Junior bench or the Sophomore wall. (c) The Freshman are requested to stand back for upper classmen at the Post Office, Tea House, Book Shop, and all doors. (d) Freshmen are requested to wear the apron and beads sold to them by the manager of the Briar Patch. (e) It has been a tradition for the Freshmen to learn the Seniors names. (f) At the end of three weeks, there shall be a day set aside freshman-sophomore day, run by the Sophomores under the jurisdiction of Inter-Class Council. (g) Learn the Sweet Briar song."²

² Sweet Briar Student Association, *Students' Handbook* (Sweet Briar College: Sweet Briar, 1932-33), 123.

The traditions should be considered rules since the phrasing did not leave room for them to be interpreted as optional. The traditions imposed levels of rank on all classes. Seniors ranked at the top, had the most privileges and demanded respect from the lower classes. Freshmen being at the bottom, had to follow the most rules and received the least amount of respect. With each class advance, Sweet Briar students had fewer restrictions and freedom in their behavior. Each of the transition to a higher class, was a small rite of passage allowing a student to prepare for the next and ultimate rite of passage, adulthood. In essence, Sweet Briar began a microcosm of American society by codifying each woman's place within the community.

Each student handbook not only had the "Traditions" section that imposed hierarchy, but a smaller section usually located at the back of the book called "Class Symbols." This page was in each handbook even prior to 1932. Each class had a motto, colors, and emblem that it maintained for its four-year cycle at Sweet Briar. For example, in 1932 the Class Symbols were:

Class of 1933

MOTTO: Honor ante honores

COLORS: Peacock blue and green

EMBLEM: Peacock

Class of 1934

MOTTO: Ne obliviscamur

COLORS: Green and black

EMBLEM: Oak tree

Class of 1935

MOTTO: Spectamur agendo

COLORS: Delph Blue and Black

EMBLEM: Lion

Class of 1936

MOTTO: Factum non verbum

COLORS: Purple and Gold

EMBLEM: Swan³

Once a class graduated, their class symbols were given to the next incoming class. For example, the symbols used by the class of 1933 were passed on to the class of 1937. This passing down of class symbols remained a tradition through the class of 1945. The class symbols are an excellent example of how Sweet Briar established unique ways of marking each class distinct and separate.

In the student handbook, along with the “Class Symbols” and the “Traditions” section, there was also one called “Practical Pointers”, which had been featured since 1906 when the first handbook was published. One “Practical Pointer” that is of particular importance when discussing hierarchy at Sweet Briar stated, “Do not forget that you are a freshman at Sweet Briar College and NOT an upperclassmen at your preparatory.”⁴ In 1935, this section was removed from the student handbook suggesting that the class system was changing and the administration no longer saw the need to state this piece of advice for the freshman. Sweet Briar could now be seen as moving further away from the strict class structure portrayed in the “Traditions” and “Class Symbols” sections and towards a more unified and equal community.

In 1935, not only was the practical pointer about how freshmen should act removed from the handbook, but there were also two other major events that took place that year. First, traditions started to appear in the *Sweet Briar News*. Second, freshman initiation, also known as Freshmen-Sophomore Day was the first tradition described in the *News*.

³ Sweet Briar Student Association, *Students' Handbook* (Sweet Briar College: Sweet Briar, 1932-33), 130.

⁴Sweet Briar Student Association, *Students' Handbook* (Sweet Briar College: Sweet Briar, 1935-36), 125.

The first article about Freshman-Sophomore day was published on October 23, 1935 and was called, "Freshman Class Survives Last Day of Annual Initiation". This title suggests something about how long freshman initiation had been occurring since the title describes it as an annual event. This implies that the "Initiation" had occurred for several years before the one cited. Freshman initiation was a yearlong process that consisted of the freshman wearing white aprons and beads until Freshman-Sophomore day, so that they could be easily recognized and distinguished from upper classmen. Freshman-Sophomore Day was the last day of the initiation, and on that day, the freshmen had to dress according to specifications designated by the sophomores. At the end of the day they would sing, dance, and act out skits or plays for the seniors and juniors in front of the Golden Stairs, the center stairs located in front of the refectory that only the seniors could sit or walk on. This last act was also known as the freshmen circus.⁵ Freshman-Sophomore day was another rite of passage that marked a student's move closer to graduation, the ultimate rite of passage. While some aspects of freshman initiation, such as the freshmen circus and the mild hazing, were meant to separate the freshman class from the upper classmen, other aspects of the tradition were meant to create a tighter bond among the Sweet Briar community. For example, initiation not only pulled the freshman class together as a whole, it also helped to develop a bond among the entire Sweet Briar community as each class took part in the events. Whether it was the freshman and sophomores organizing the circus or the juniors and seniors watching the show, ultimately, it was a day in which everyone could take part and enjoy.

⁵ A student, "Freshman Class Survives Last Day of Annual Initiation." *Sweet Briar News*, 23 October 1935.

Along with the new spirit of bonding among classes and creating a tighter knit community, there were also some changes made to an already existing section in the *Students' Handbook* entitled "class privileges." Before 1935, this section had only listed seniors as having privileges, but by 1936 juniors, sophomores, and freshmen were included in this section. In 1936, the class privileges were as follows:

(b) Class privileges:

- (1) Seniors may have unlimited dates.
- (2) Juniors may have unlimited dates.
- (3) Sophomores may have dates on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays.
- (4) Freshmen may have dates on Saturdays and Sundays.

Section 2

(a) Seniors:

- (1) Seniors may return from Lynchburg and Amherst with men until 10:25 pm

(2) Seniors, with special or general permission of their parents, may motor with men in the daytime upon registration in the Dean's office.

- (b) Juniors, Sophomores, and Freshmen may ride to Lynchburg and Amherst with men during the daytime, provided that they return to campus by 7:30pm⁶

This enhancement of social freedoms for each class is a major concern when discussing the shift in hierarchy at Sweet Briar College. Because of those new rules it was not only the seniors who had the benefit of some social freedom while away from home, but also every other class. While the rules did not allow each class the same level of privileges, it established more equality between classes and opened the door for subsequent changes in hierarchy to take place on campus.

In April 1941, there was a shift in the way hierarchy and traditions worked at Sweet Briar. Prior to 1941, the majority of traditions dealt with maintaining a division between the classes such as, freshman initiation, class privileges, class symbols, etc.

⁶ Sweet Briar Student Association, *Students' Handbook* (Sweet Briar College: Sweet Briar, 1935-36), 33.

While these traditions did continue after 1941, new traditions were established and behaviors adjusted. The most important one was “sister classes”, which ultimately became a much stronger tradition. The concept of Sister classes paired freshmen with juniors and sophomores with seniors, to encourage and assist each other. Although this practice had been in existence for a time, 1941 was the first year that Sister classes were mentioned with frequency in the *Sweet Briar News*.

On April 20, 1941, an article appeared in the *Sweet Briar News* entitled, “Juniors Hold Picnic in Honor of Freshman.” This article specifically relates to hierarchy and traditions at Sweet Briar, and describes an upper class doing something positive for a lower class.⁷ On April 30th, a little over a week after the first article was published, a second article appeared entitled, “Sophomores Honor Seniors at Traditional Banquet.” One striking fact in connection with this article is that for something to be a “tradition” at Sweet Briar it must occur for at least three years in a row.⁸ Therefore, this event between Sister classes must have occurred for at least three years prior to the one cited. However, it took until 1941 for the event to be publicized suggesting that only recently had the behavior gained widespread acceptance.

On May 28, 1941, two articles appeared in the *Sweet Briar News* that clearly depicted the change that had slowly been forming in classes’ attitudes toward each other. One article is from an upper classmen and one from a sophomore, but both discuss traditions at Sweet Briar and give advice to incoming freshmen. The first article was entitled, “Traditions Play a Vital Part in Sweet Briar Campus Life” was written by an upper

⁷ “Juniors Hold Picnic In Honor of Freshmen.” *Sweet Briar News*, 20 April 1941.

⁸ “Sophomores Honor Seniors at Traditional Banquet.” *Sweet Briar News*, 30 April 1941.

classman; it described each class' sacred spot on campus. For example, the seniors had the Golden Stairs, the juniors had the Junior Bench, the sophomores had the Sophomore Wall, and the freshmen had the Fire Plug. Additionally, the article set out the rules to be observed with respect to each of the class "shrines" and also described the basics of freshmen initiation.⁹ The second article, "The Sophomore Class Extends Friendly Advice to Freshmen," had similarities to the first. In it, the sophomores stated that they, "...would like to extend to you (freshmen) our welcome in advance, and to wish you lots of luck next year. Just to prove we (sophomores) really mean it, we will pass on to you a few tips..." The article goes on to describe what sacred spots are, how to meet people, and most importantly not to be afraid of the upper classmen. The article even jokes not, "...to be afraid of them (upperclassmen). They're probably a lot more afraid of you (freshmen)."¹⁰ Both articles are geared towards helping the freshmen feel comfortable and a part of the Sweet Briar community rather than trying to tell the freshmen their place in the hierarchy. This behavioral shift demonstrates how another step was taken to make hierarchy on campus less structured and foreboding.

Another relevant article appears on October 7, 1942 in the *Sweet Briar News* entitled, "INITIATION: As a Freshman Sees it, As a Sophomore Sees It." Both the prior freshman and sophomore classes described how they perceived the tradition of freshmen initiation. The freshman writer suggested that the initiation caused freshmen to lose sleep and considered the initiation hazing. She further stated that she hoped there would not be "171 casualties in the student population" for next year. However, the writer added, "But

⁹ "Traditions Play a Vital Part in Sweet Briar Campus Life," *Sweet Briar News*, 28 May 1941.

¹⁰ "The Sophomore Class Extends Friendly Advice To Freshmen," *Sweet Briar News*, 28 May 1941

don't get us wrong; we love Sweet Briar! All we can say is 'Class of 1947, BEWARE!' experience is a wonderful teacher." Therefore, it appears the freshman class had some mixed feelings about freshmen initiation. They were not thrilled with the hazing that was going on and the way they were treated, however, they wanted to make it clear that this had no effect on how loyal they were to Sweet Briar. To the sophomores, "...the Freshmen do not as yet fit the pattern of true S.B. girls. The Sophomore class hopes to remedy this sad situation between now and the seventeenth of October, Freshman-Sophomore Day."¹¹ The sophomores seemed to suggest that Freshmen Initiation was in its own way a rite of passage. They thought that without the initiation, a freshman was not a real member of Sweet Briar. While this article is important on its own, it is even more striking when paired with another article written a couple of years later. The second article was published in the *Sweet Briar News* on December 6, 1944 and was called "Freshmen of Future Undergo No Initiation." It described how President Glass and the Board of Directors had decided that freshmen initiation was an act of hazing and since hazing was not allowed at Sweet Briar, freshmen initiation would no longer be practiced. Thus, the Board of Directors' views and the mood of the students seemed to have changed on the topic of hazing. While even the president and Board of Directors admitted that "...there were several good elements in the initiation, but it is possible to obtain them in some other way."¹² With this decision, a major tradition that had helped maintain strict levels of hierarchy at Sweet Briar was abolished.

¹¹ "INITIATION: As a Freshman Sees it, As a Sophomore Sees It," *Sweet Briar News*, 7 October 1942

¹² "Freshmen of Future Undergo no initiation," *Sweet Briar News*, 6 December 1944.

With the end of Freshmen-Sophomore day came a new way of looking at each class at Sweet Briar. The 1945 yearbook showed how each class was viewed by the junior class, who were the publishers of the book. Prior to each set of class pictures there was a brief paragraph about the class and what had happened throughout the year. There was also a reference to the community and the bonds between the classes that had been created. As regards the freshmen class, it detailed the activities throughout the year and added that experience would, "...make them an individual mass that is bound to evolve into one of the most capable groups of Sweet Briar's Career." The sophomore's description stated that various traditions, "...keep alive our enthusiasm and to knit us more closely together as a class and as an integral part of Sweet Briar." The juniors also wrote about themselves, "We proudly took possession of our bench and welcomed our sister class the freshmen, to Sweet Briar tradition." Finally, in the paragraph about the seniors it states that they hold "... the most honored position in the school, the culmination of all that is Sweet Briar. We look to them for leadership and inspiration, and they capably accept this responsibility."¹³

These writings demonstrated how the bond within each class had grown but also how the bond between the classes had become stronger as well. The tone of each paragraph suggested that the strict hierarchical structure was almost gone. Classes were no longer viewed simply as individual units but as part of a larger unit, the Sweet Briar community.

In 1945, the last blow to hierarchy at Sweet Briar College came in the form of another change to the *Students' Handbook*. Specifically, in the 1944-45 handbook the "traditions" section was reduced to simply a list in the "Miscellaneous" section, but

¹³ Junior Class, *The Briar Patch 1945* (Sweet Briar, 1945)

continued to be listed by letter from “a” to “g”, and in 1946, there were no traditions listed at all, except for the ones that dealt with the sacred spots. While devoid of any menace, Sweet Briar’s love of traditions still prevailed¹⁴.

These changes were important because they illustrated a complete paradigm shift in the student, faculty, and administration’s perception of the social structure at Sweet Briar. Prior to 1945, students were expected to acknowledge, through traditions and behavior, the fact that seniors were at the top and freshmen were at the bottom of the social hierarchy. However, after 1945, there is clear evidence of the lessening of concern for the levels of rank between classes at Sweet Briar.

This shift in the way that Sweet Briar dealt with hierarchy and traditions leaves one with many questions: Why such a change in ideals? Why change the system through traditions? Was it the students who changed the traditions or the administration?

The answer is rooted in these traditions since they comprised the largest and most significant differences between classes. For example, freshmen were required to wear different outfits just so that they could be recognized and segregated. The lower the class ranking, the more its members were hazed and made to feel separate. When traditions changed to emphasize more class unity and a sense of similarity between classes, the student body interacted more cohesively resulting in a stronger sense of community. While it was likely the administration that initiated this trend towards a more unified campus built on equality, the students soon learned to embrace it.

With this change in traditions came a change in the perceived rites of passage that characterized the college experience. Traditions at Sweet Briar changed from a series of

¹⁴ Sweet Briar Student Association, *Students’ Handbook* (Sweet Briar College: Sweet Briar, 1944-45), 123.

rites of passages into one large unified experience. Sweet Briar is a classic example of how the ideals of status and hierarchy changed and how the process is slow and gradual.

While it is hard to understand the motivations of a different generation, one can find clues from examining the major events that took place during the period. In the late nineteen thirties there were many laws enacted and public policies established for those most impacted by the Great Depression. America's sense of security had been shattered with many people suffering dramatic financial reversals. Social status was changing and the standard of living was declining nationwide. Public welfare was the most significant issue facing America and through groundbreaking legislation such as the Social Security Act and Fair Labor Standards Act, average citizens were assured retirement pensions and equal wages for equal work. No longer was it up to the individual to make his or her way in the world alone, now they had help from government agencies.

By the early 1940's living standards were improving due to the increased manufacture of war time goods, the creation of manufacturing jobs as well as growth in the military due to the Second World War. Along with this growth came even more opportunities for equality as women replaced male workers drafted into the military. The growth in technology and manufacturing capacity paved the way for the US to produce most of the goods needed for the post-war renovation of Europe and Japan. This created a booming economy and rapidly improving standard of living for ex-GIs and their families.

After World War II, the improvements in educational opportunities and standards of living created a middle class that had not previously existed. This growing middle class coming after the unifying effects of a World War resulted in a smaller gap between

the lower class and upper classes in American society. This elimination of many hierarchical differences between social classes in America is a parallel to the evolution of Sweet Briar College and its traditions.

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Student Government Association, ed. *Student's Handbook*. Sweet Briar, VA: Sweet Briar College, 1906-present.

The handbooks list out the rules and regulations of Sweet Briar College. Including ones on major clubs, athletics, student government, and ones dealing with yearly events on campus. It also has a miscellaneous section that just lists out things that the school thought the students should know. The handbooks also reflect the trends of the time, including changes in social views and values. It is also very helpful in allowing one to track small changes.

The Sweet Briar News. Sweet Briar, VA: Sweet Briar College, 1927-1998.

Published about once a week during the school year. Is a good record of sporting events, club activities, small administrative changes, important events on campus, and students view on different events or important questions of the time. Almost all articles are written by students and most likely reviewed by a faculty member before publication. The newspaper is supposed to portray sweet briar in a good light so the articles reflect this. Very good as a primary source many students write about events they actually attended or participated in.

The Junior Class. *The Briar Patch*. Sweet Briar, VA: Sweet Briar College, 1906 to present

This is Sweet Briar's yearbook. It has pictures of faculty staff, all the students, clubs, organizations, and major events through out the year. Does not contain a lot of written material only things written to explain events or to say something about a graduating senior. The book is published by the junior class, yearly, but is probably looked over by administration to check and make sure that there are no bad representations of sweet briar.

Secondary sources:

Turner, Victor. *The Forest of Symbols*. New York: University of Cornell Press, 1967

This book is about rights of passage in African tribes. But Turner is a well known anthropologist who developed a respected theory of rites of passage that can apply to any culture, society, or community. There are several paragraphs that just explain what a rite of passage is.