

Pinnacles of Faith: The building of the Chapel and the changing of religious attitudes at Sweet Briar College from 1957-1967

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April 23, 2007
History 105: Sweet Briar History
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I pledge

At Sweet Briar College, the role of religion has changed over time. In the 1950s, students were less prone to question their beliefs. However, in the 1960s, students started rebelling and questioning their beliefs about life, society, and most importantly, religion. What was the influence of religion at Sweet Briar College during 1957-1967? According to McCandless, "Religious practices, too, remained far more traditional at Southern women's colleges."¹ The time period 1957-1967 was important because it marked the building of the Chapel and the changing of religious attitudes. At the same time, the Religion department began offering more courses dealing with non-Christian religions. In addition, what factors shaped the religious influence during the same time period (1957-1967) at Sweet Briar College?

The main tension in the religious life of the college came from the Alumnae versus the students. The motivation for building the Chapel came from Alumnae rather than current students. Faculty were not involved with the decision of the Chapel- a thorough review of the Faculty Minutes from the time period yields no mention of the Chapel.

In order to find out about the Chapel, I utilized both the Alumnae News and the Sweet Briar News. Using both of them together, I was best able to understand what the general views were. Unfortunately, I was not able to locate the Instructional Committee Meeting Minutes from 1960-1965. This posed a serious problem, since the Instructional Committee Meeting Minutes would show why some religion courses were added and others were dropped. After meeting with the archivist, I have concluded that the minutes

¹ McCandless, Amy Thompson "Preserving the Pedestal: Restriction on Social Life at Southern Colleges for Women 1920-1940." *History of Higher Education Annual*, Volume 7 (1987), 51

were indeed missing and were never given to Sweet Briar. Thus, while they are somewhere, I did not have access to them. I have done my best with the information I have.

The first mention of the building of the Chapel was in the *Alumnae News* on June 1, 1957. "On March 9th, a letter was sent out to former choir members who would support a building project for the Chapel. The response has...been most encouraging: \$4,050 in representing gifts and pledges."² This is important because it confirms that the motivation to build the Chapel came from the Alumnae and the Development Office, rather than the current students themselves.

The students did not hear about the news of the Chapel until two years later. On Wednesday October 7, 1959, the *Sweet Briar News* mentioned the Chapel for the first time. According to the article, "Sweet Briar reports gifts totaling \$100,000 for endowment for several proposed buildings...Of the total funds in various amounts were designated for a science building, a chapel, and the fine arts center..."³ This set the stage for the tension of the alumnae versus the students. The time lapse of two years showed that the students seemed to be the last to hear about the Chapel Fund.

During the same two years, the college changed the course offerings and enrollment for religion courses declined. According to a report published for the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, the Religion department during 1957-1959 was a moderately large department. In numbers, it was larger than Art, Biology, Chemistry, Greek and Latin, Mathematics, German, Italian, Physics, Economics, Government, History, and Sociology. In the fall of 1957, there were 172

² "Sweet Briar Memorial Chapel" *Alumnae News* 1 June 1957, 12.

³ "Sweet Briar Receives Gifts" *Sweet Briar News* 7 October 1959.

students enrolled in Religion courses. In the spring of 1958, this number increased slightly to 183. However, there was a sharp decline in the fall of 1958 when 121 students took religion courses. In the spring of 1959, 148 students were enrolled in religion courses.⁴ The decline between 1957-1958, and 1958-1959 showed a decrease in student interest in religion courses. This could be attributed to a decline in general religious activity in Sweet Briar during the same time. Unfortunately, I was not able to find any enrollment data for the religion courses during any of the other years.

In addition to enrollment number, the course offerings were a good indication of what religious attitudes on campus were. Between 1959-1960 and 1960-1961, one more semester of Religions of the Middle East (220) was added.^{5 6} This course change was significant because it showed that the Religion department was slowly moving away from Christian based courses and towards non-Western religions.

Further changes in religious attitudes affected fundraising efforts. In February 1962, the Sweet Briar News published an article about raising money for buildings. It mentioned that in the past, students had helped to raise money for buildings on campus by holding soup dinners and selling bricks. An alumna had posed a challenge to the Sweet Briar students,

“This alumna will contribute \$50,000 to the Sweet Briar Chapel Fund if 50% of all alumnae contribute to the alumnae fund. This gift has also been offered in another way, namely that \$1,000 will be credited toward the chapel for each class that contributes to the alumnae fund... Such a challenge should not only serve to

⁴ Roland, Richard. “Report of Self-Study for the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools- Sweet Briar College.” January 1960.

⁵ *Sweet Briar College: Courses of Instruction 1959-1960*, 85.

⁶ *Sweet Briar College: Courses of Instruction 1960-1961*, 85.

simulate further alumnae interest, but also should make us who are here now aware of their interest in the college's future."⁷

The times had changed. Sweet Briar students were no longer the major source of funding and impetus for new buildings on campus. In the past, students had helped to raise money for the Daisy Williams Gymnasium and other campus buildings. Now, the source of funding came from the Alumnae. There was no full name given in the article, only the initials N.W.H., which could possibly mean that someone in the Alumnae Office or in the Development Office wrote it. The changing religious atmosphere meant that perhaps the Development Office had to resort to sneaky measures in order to get students to contribute money to a cause the students did not find particularly worthwhile.

In the April edition of the Alumnae News in 1962, another article asked for help with fundraising. In the past, Manson Hall had served as the College Chapel. However, Sweet Briar needed a more appropriate place of worship. "From its time of inception to the present day this college has held its Christian heritage center in its life... A beautiful Chapel will not only preserve a great heritage but will lend itself to create a temper of life consonant with religious values."⁸ This was quite a different call for help than in the Sweet Briar News. The traditional Alumnae women still held on to the idea of a "Southern pedestal" and a firm grasp of Christian religion. The author of this article knew that if she appealed to the traditional side of the alums then she would elicit more donations and support. Interestingly, when comparing the article in the Alumnae News to that in the Sweet Briar News, there is no mention of the "Christian heritage" in the Sweet Briar News. This is a sign of the changing times. Either students were not as

⁷ N.W.H. "Alumnae Interest High" *Sweet Briar News* 14 February 1962, 2.

⁸ Lyman, Mary Ely "Can You Manage?" *Alumnae News* April 1962, 1.

involved in religion, or perhaps there were more students of different religious backgrounds.

Some students disagreed as to how the Chapel was set out. 5 students wrote a letter to the Editor of the Sweet Briar News saying that it was unfair that students were not allowed to vote on the architectural plans of the Chapel.⁹ This was due to the lack of student support. If the students had been more supportive of the Chapel from the beginning, they might have had a bigger voice on the project.

Student support for the Chapel was not as strong as the alumnae would have hoped. At the same time that funds were being raised for the Chapel, funds were also being raised for another building on campus, the Guion Science Center. The director of development received a total of \$7,115.60 from students. Of that money, \$6,532.50 was for the Science Center and \$505.35 was marked for the Chapel. In addition, the Athletic Association added \$57.75 to fund a swimming pool in the gym.¹⁰ While the students still showed interest in the Chapel, they appeared more interested in the building of a new science facility. The students were more interested in academic life than religious life.

Even though the students were somewhat apathetic, the turning point was the groundbreaking of the chapel. The contract was awarded to C.L. Lewis & Co of Lynchburg, who was the lowest bidders on the project. The Chapel was built between Grammer and Randolph, two residence halls in the Upper Quad. One unusual feature

⁹ "Letters to the Editor" *Sweet Briar News* 11 March 1964, 2.

¹⁰ "Funds Increase for SBC Buildings" *Sweet Briar News* 23 September 1964, 6.

was the freestanding altar. According to the architects, the contract figure was \$473,473.

¹¹ The groundbreaking ceremony took place on October 28, 1964. ¹²

The Sweet Briar News reported that the chapel was scheduled for completion in November 1965. The news article mentioned both the Guion Science Center and the Chapel as “impressive attractions on campus”. However, there were only pictures of Guion under construction, and one of the pictures had the caption “March, and we can’t believe our eyes!”¹³ This obviously shows the favoritism on campus towards the new Science Center and academia.

The cornerstone of the Chapel was laid on May 31, 1965 at noon. It was preceded by the annual meeting of the alumnae who, according to Sweet Briar News, “...have been very interested in a new chapel and have done a great deal toward raising money for it...”¹⁴ This turning point was very important because it marked the point at which the alumnae finally got the Chapel that they felt they deserved and had worked for. Students were probably pleased, however, it was not a monumental event. Looking at it from a monetary standpoint, the \$500 that the students raised for the Chapel was very little compared to the total cost.

After building the Chapel, the influence of the Christian religion on the Sweet Briar Religion department started to decline. Between 1960-1961 and 1963-1964, the college added two courses- Christian Ethics (201) and Contemporary Theological Trends (202) while Contemporary Issues and Christian Theological Thought (211 or 212) were

¹¹ “Chapel Plans Definitely Set; Work to Begin by Next Month” *Sweet Briar News*, 21 October 1961, 1.

¹² “The Sweet Briar Memorial Chapel” pamphlet. Date unknown.

¹³ “Science Bldg, Chapel Progressing” *Sweet Briar News* 10 March 1965, 5.

¹⁴ “Chapel To Be Completed Late Fall, Cornerstone To Be Laid on May 31” *Sweet Briar News* 31 May 1965, 4.

dropped.^{15 16} The replacement of Contemporary Issues and Theological Thought with the new course, Contemporary Theological Trends shows a further shift away from the purely Christian views of religion. Between the years 1963-1964 and 1966-1967, the college added Studies in the New Testament (210) and The American Religious Traditions (217) and The Ministry of Jesus (205 or 206) and Pauline and Johannine Christianity (208) were dropped.^{17 18} The courses offered reflected a shift in the students' attitude towards Christianity and religion in general. Due to the lack of information, two assumptions can be made from the courses offered. Either students demanded more courses dealing with other religions, or perhaps the time period dictated that students studying religion should learn about a wider range of religions. Thus, the year 1967 marked the end of the building of the Chapel and the changing of religion courses at Sweet Briar.

One interesting trend was that the number of graduating seniors who majored in Religion sharply declined from the 1950s to the 1970s. In the Briar Patch Yearbook of 1952, there were 11 Religion Majors and 3 Religion and Social Problems majors out of a class of 96.¹⁹ In 1957, there were 5 Religion Majors out of a class of 85.²⁰ In 1967, there were 6 Religion Majors out of a class of 107.²¹ In 1973, there were only 2 Religion Majors out of a whopping class of 162.²² Over time, this showed a trend away from the study of religion to other areas, such as the sciences and the humanities. The shift of

¹⁵ *Sweet Briar College Course Catalog: 1960-1961*, 85.

¹⁶ *Sweet Briar College Course Catalog: 1963-1964*, 86.

¹⁷ *Sweet Briar College Course Catalog: 1963-1964*, 86.

¹⁸ *Sweet Briar College Course Catalog: 1966-1967*, 85.

¹⁹ *The Briar Patch Yearbook, 1952*.

²⁰ *The Briar Patch Yearbook, 1957*.

²¹ *The Briar Patch Yearbook, 1967*.

²² *The Briar Patch Yearbook, 1973*.

study demonstrates the declining role of religion on the Sweet Briar campus during the 1950s and the 1960s.

In conclusion, the Christian influence at Sweet Briar College gradually declined between the years 1957-1967. Despite the building of a magnificent Chapel, the number of students taking religion courses and majoring in Religion declined. In addition, the Religion department started to change its course offerings. More courses dealing with non-Christian religions were added and some Christianity courses were dropped. One major factor that affects the religious attitude at Sweet Briar was the building of the Chapel. The catalyst for building the Chapel came from the Alumnae rather than the students, which created tension on campus. Interestingly enough, when the Chapel was first mentioned, religion at Sweet Briar had already started to decline in importance. McCandless' notion that religious practices at Southern women's colleges had remained behind the times was indeed true. It was only during the late 1950s that religion had started its slow decline. This is entirely possible given the series of events happening in the world. While in the 1950s, students were still holding onto traditional beliefs, those started change in the late 1950s. In the 1960s, students were questioning a lot of basic beliefs including their religious views. It is possible that the Alumnae Association tried to remedy the lack of religion on campus by building a Chapel in order to stimulate religious and spiritual growth on campus. Despite the tension in the beginning, the Chapel holds a dear place in the heart of many Sweet Briar students and alumnae.

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

Alumnae News 1957, 1962

This source was very useful in getting a viewpoint of the Alumnae. Since the Chapel was mostly built on the donations of Alumnae, I found it interesting how different points were addressed. I accessed the Alumnae News in the Sweet Briar Archives. The Alumnae News dealt with raising money for the Chapel and the building of the Chapel.

The Briar Patch Yearbook 1952, 1957, 1967, 1972

This source I only used to get quantitative information. I counted how many seniors were Religion majors out of the entire senior class. Unfortunately, I could not use the Briar Patch for any further information, since there was little information on religion.

“Report of Self-Study for the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools-Sweet Briar” prepared by Richard Roland, January 1960, 30, 34

This source was particularly useful for numerical data. It showed how many students were enrolled in religion courses between 1957-1958 and 1958-1959. This numerical data was particularly useful since it was good solid evidence, and it clearly showed a change in the number of students. I only wish that somehow I could've found the number of students enrolled in religion courses over my entire time span from 1957-1967.

“The Sweet Briar Memorial Chapel” pamphlet. Sweet Briar Archives, Sweet Briar College, Sweet Briar, VA.

I found this pamphlet to be useful when describing the Chapel. It had a lot of information on the different aspects of the chapel, such as the Main Chapel, the Altar and Cross, and the Choir and Organ. I was only able to use the dates mentioned in the end. However, it had a lot of important information that I would've liked to use if it had fit in better with my research.

Sweet Briar College Course Catalog: 1959-1960, 1960-1961, 1963-1964, 1966-1967

This source told me what Religion courses were offered at Sweet Briar during the years. This source was very useful since I was able to see the change in courses offered over the years. Unfortunately, I was not able to find out why some courses were dropped and other courses were added, since the Instructional Committee Meeting Minutes were missing from 1960-1965.

Sweet Briar News 1959, 1962-1965

This source was very helpful. It was accessed through the microfilm in the library. This source dealt with the information regarding the building of the Chapel and student involvement in the process. This source was especially helpful in getting the viewpoint of the general student body. I also found this source to be accurate, since the dates mentioned in the Sweet Briar News match the dates in a pamphlet about Chapel.

Secondary Sources

McCandless, Amy Thompson. "Preserving the Pedestal: Restrictions on Social Life at Southern Colleges for Women, 1920-1940" *History of Higher Education* Volume 7 (1987): 51

I found this source useful to back up my thesis. Despite the fact that Sweet Briar was not associated with a religious body, it was still interesting to see how religious life at Sweet Briar sometimes mirrored that at non-secular schools. In addition, I could also see how the Alumnae Association appealed to the alums by putting them on the "pedestal".