

[Karen Tidman
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for workshop on minorities]

History of the Status of Minority Groups in the Bryn Mawr Student Body

The history of diversity at Bryn Mawr has been recorded and examined in very sporadic ways and is not easily traced. Of the three published histories or collections of reminiscences of the College, none contains information on this issue. [They are: What Makes a College? A History of Bryn Mawr by Cornelia Meigs (1956, Macmillan), Carey Thomas of Bryn Mawr by Edith Finch (1947, Harper and Bros.), and A Century Recalled: Essays in Honor of Bryn Mawr College (1987, Bryn Mawr College Library).] In the archives one encounters inconsistent statements made when earlier staff or students have tried to put together the material that is there. Different dates are given for the first Ph.D. awarded to a black woman, the first black student to live in residence, etc. The racial and ethnic composition of classes was not recorded until quite recent times and some events were not considered appropriate for any kind of public record. Pieces of the history which seem very important are missing. There was, for instance, a black woman who came to Bryn Mawr in the 1920's and stayed only one week. Nothing is recorded about her except, in 1975, that she does not wish to appear on any alumnae lists. Surely whether she chose to leave or was asked to, and what happened to her while she was here, are crucial to the history of the College and the history of access to American higher education for blacks.

What follows is a summary of the materials which I was able to pull together. They do not represent all of the evidence available. Since The College News is indexed only to the 1940's and the newer Bryn Mawr-Haverford News is not indexed at all, one would need to read very thoroughly in those back issues to get the fullest possible picture of recent decades. There are also letters and oral histories from individual alumnae which might be useful, as well as living alumnae and faculty members who could be interviewed. An exhaustive study was not possible, but many of the critical points in the history of minority students at Bryn Mawr do emerge from even this preliminary study.

To start at the beginning, it is useful to remember the text of Dr. Joseph Taylor's will in which he dedicated his estate to the establishment of a college for the "advanced education of females." It is dated January 19, 1877. He directed his money to be used to erect buildings "for the comfort advanced education and care of young women, or girls of the higher classes of society." Preference in admission was to go to members of the Society of Friends, but in all cases those were to be preferred who were "of high moral and religious attainments and good examples and influence." Diversity was not one of his goals.

History of Black Students at Bryn Mawr

1916

President M. Carey Thomas's address at the opening of college included her thoughts on white intellectual supremacy and expressed pride in the ethnic homogeneity of Bryn Mawr students.