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## Redefining Gender Roles in Higher Education: Women at Gettysburg College during World War II

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## Redefining Gender Roles in Higher Education: Women at Gettysburg College during World War II

### Abstract

Throughout the early 20th century, the role of American women began to change. The U.S. entrance into World War II and resulting draft provided women at institutions of higher education the opportunity to develop their place on college campuses. Through analyzing yearbooks, student publications, and personal testimonies, the case of Gettysburg College provides a lens to better understand the changing dynamics on college campuses during the war years. Although men remained on the campus of Gettysburg College during the war years, the changing dynamics of the College, both academically and socially, allowed women the opportunity to increase not only their presence, but their leadership capabilities.

### Keywords

World War II, Women, Gettysburg College

### Disciplines

United States History | Women's History | Women's Studies

### Comments

Written for HIST 348: Early Twentieth Century America

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Redefining Gender Roles in Higher Education:

Women at Gettysburg College During World War II

By: Addison Lomax

Due: Wednesday, April 27<sup>th</sup>, 2022

HIST-348: Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century America

Professor Birkner

I affirm that I have upheld the highest principles of honesty and integrity in my academic work  
and have not witnessed a violation of the Honor Code.

Looking back on the role of women during World War II, images of Rosie the Riveter and men in uniform come to the minds of many Americans. Whether it was working in factories to make airplane wings, or rationing gas to beat the Axis powers, ideas of sacrifice, hard work, and unity became crucial to the success of the United States in both the European and Pacific theaters. While many young men were fighting abroad, and their wives were replacing their factory jobs, many Americans found themselves at institutions of higher education. In the case of Gettysburg College, World War II provided an opportunity for shifts in the previously understood gender norms of the time. Although men remained on the campus of Gettysburg College during the war years, the changing dynamics of the College, both academically and socially, allowed women the opportunity to increase not only their presence, but their leadership capabilities.

The Gettysburg College Special Collections contain college documents dating back to its founding. Containing yearbooks, faculty minutes, student scrapbooks, and more, Special Collections provided the primary source materials which made this research possible. The consecutive years emphasized are the years 1943 to 1944. Although the United States officially entered World War II in January of 1942, Gettysburg College did not begin to see large effects from the war on campus until closer to 1943. The personal diaries and documents throughout the collection feature the beliefs and opinions some students had on the war at the time; however, a lot of the archives focus on student life and academics. Additionally, books written about the college, such as Josephine Fish Langdon Collitt's *The Last of "The Good Old Days,"* and Charles Glatfelter's *A Salutary Influence*, serve to contextualize the college experience and provide insight into the lives of the students during World War II. Overall, the case of

Gettysburg College serves as an example reflecting the greater significance of World War II on the role of women at institutions of higher education.

Prior to World War II, the role of women had already changed throughout the history of the College. For example, from the years 1931-1934, Gettysburg College stopped admitting women.<sup>1</sup> Once the decision was reversed and women began returning to the school in the fall of 1935, numbers rose significantly. This is because “some 64 were recruited on short notice for the fall of 1935. There were 131 for 1936 and 142 for 1937.”<sup>2</sup> Between women being allowed back on campus and the increase in men going to school, attendance at Gettysburg soared. In the 1940-41 school year, the College had 579 Bachelor’s degree candidates, with 593 students total.<sup>3</sup> The following year from 1941-42, there were 637 Bachelor’s degree candidates with 651 students in total.<sup>4</sup> Although attendance was rising, World War II caused a drastic decline in the number of students at the College, particularly men.<sup>5</sup> The 1942-1943 year suffered a record low of 294 total students, with 289 of them being Bachelor’s degree candidates.<sup>6</sup> The decline in students was severe to the point that “as demands for military manpower increased, enrollment fell back to almost precisely the levels of World War I.”<sup>7</sup>

Although the College lost members to the draft, the administration, led by President Henry W.A. Hanson, continued to introduce measures to ensure that some male students were

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<sup>1</sup> Gettysburg College Catalog 1933/34-1936/37, 159. Gettysburg College Archives (Hereafter GCA). At one point during the 1932-1933 academic year, only 8 women were students at the College. There were no women in attendance during the 1933-1934 academic year.

<sup>2</sup> Charles A. Glatfelter, “Toward a Greater Gettysburg (1905-1945),” in A Salutary Influence: Gettysburg College, 1832-1985 (Gettysburg, PA: Gettysburg College, 1987), 2: 586.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 585.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* The 1941-1942 academic year had a record high of 668 Bachelor’s degree candidates with 680 total students. This was likely because the draft age was still 21 until the Burke-Wadsworth Act changed the minimum draft age to 18 in 1942.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 586.

still on the campus. For example, in an attempt to counter-act the departure of men due to the wartime draft, the administration implemented a year-round schooling program which allowed students to take courses and graduate as quickly as possible.<sup>8</sup> By allowing students at the College for a span of several months to a year, men were able to graduate with degrees in ministry and medicine at a rapid rate, ultimately making them eligible to help with the war efforts.<sup>9</sup>

Additionally, at Hanson's instigation, a military training program was hosted at the College which brought 1,659 men to campus between its beginning in March 1943 and conclusion in May of 1944.<sup>10</sup> The 55<sup>th</sup> College Training Detachment (Aircrew) of the Army Air Forces had approximately 550 men on the College's campus at any given point in time.<sup>11</sup> The men recruited through the program occupied a significant portion of campus, ultimately displacing those who remained as undergraduates. With men living in Pennsylvania, McKnight, and Huber Hall, as well as an infirmary in the Phi Kappa Psi House, "the College took over the fraternity houses, assigned women to room and board in some of them and men to occupy others."<sup>12</sup> The program was eventually substituted in June 1944 for the 333<sup>rd</sup> Service Command Unit, Army Specialized Training Unit of the Army Air Forces which only had 225 participants around the time it began.<sup>13</sup> Although there may not have been as many traditional male students as the College had held in previous years, there was still a presence on campus during the war years, particularly accredited to the separate military program hosted by Gettysburg College.

In addition to providing opportunities for men to study and engage in activities, the administration went a step further and increased the number of women students allowed on

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<sup>8</sup> "Hanson Gives Plan for Army College; Expects Air Corps," *The Gettysburgian*, Nov 4, 1943, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Charles A. Glatfelter, *A Salutary Influence*, 732.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 733.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*; "Hanson Gives Plan for Army College," 1.

<sup>12</sup> Charles A. Glatfelter, *A Salutary Influence*, 732.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 733.

campus. As a result, women were able to challenge their understood role in the home, since their odds of finding a husband at school became less likely due to the reduced number of male students. Because the College was desperate for attendees

In May 1944 it authorized 250 women, but only for 1944-1945. Women outnumbered men in the student body in the two war years of 1943-1945. The class of 1944 was the first in the history of the College in which there were more women graduated than men.<sup>14</sup>

Despite efforts to maintain the same number of students as pre-war years, the College was unable to match the 1941-1942 attendance. While in 1941-1942 the student body was close to 700, in the 1942-43 school year it was closer to 300. Additionally, “The number of male students had now dropped from about 500 in the previous year to 100, while the number of women had increased slightly, to about 190.”<sup>15</sup> As a result, the remaining individuals had the opportunity to rise to the occasion and become involved in student life in order to make up for the lack of numbers on campus.

Women were presented an opportunity, for the first time since their re-admittance in the fall of 1935, to make a significant impact on the campus culture. Alongside the curriculum expansion, which introduced over 259 courses, women’s extracurricular involvement was not affected to a large extent by the war.<sup>16</sup> Men’s sports teams, on the contrary, had to stop playing for the 1943-1944 season. Despite attempts to keep the College’s athletic scene ‘normal,’

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<sup>14</sup> Charles A. Glatfelter, *A Salutory Influence*, 593.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 732.

<sup>16</sup> Charles A. Glatfelter, *A Salutory Influence*, 563. The engineering program was officially dropped from the curriculum in June of 1940.

There was no 1943, 1944, or 1945 football season and none in 1943 or 1944 for baseball. Basketball was the only varsity sport, which was not interrupted, but it did not have its normal number of games.”<sup>17</sup>

As a result, women on campus were not spending their time on the figurative and literal side lines. In fact, for the first time, coeducational sports began development at Gettysburg. *The Gettysburgian* noted in the spring of 1944, “We are glad to hear of the plans finally in progress for intramural softball this spring on the college campus.”<sup>18</sup> The organization of the Women’s Athletic Association, or W.A.A., in 1944, set the precedent for the 1944-1945 seasons in which Eleanor Zimmerman led the effort to allow “Coeds...to participate competitively in basketball, volleyball, bowling, softball, badminton, tennis, archery, and ping pong.”<sup>19</sup> The loss of men to the war left a gap in athletics on campus, which women were happy to fill and establish themselves as participants in, even following the return of the male students.

Additionally, extracurriculars such as choir, *The Gettysburgian*, and the Owl and Nightingale Players continued on a limited scale. The choir had a normal season aside from its tour which was cancelled, since “A Capella Choir was hit probably harder than any other organization on campus, losing about ten members of the bass and tenor sections, out of a total of approximately twenty.”<sup>20</sup> Similarly, *The Gettysburgian* continued to function, publishing bi-weekly, because it “lost several editors, and practically all of the men [on the] staff had to resign to enter the service.”<sup>21</sup> As a result, *The Gettysburgian* acquired its first female editor in 1944.

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<sup>17</sup> Charles A. Glatfelter, *A Salutory Influence*, 688.

<sup>18</sup> Chilly Argus, “From the Press Box,” *The Gettysburgian*, March 23, 1944, 3.

<sup>19</sup> “Women’s Intramurals,” Gettysburg College, *The Spectrum*, 1946, 47, 70, GCA.

<sup>20</sup> “Make Music with the A Capella Choir,” Gettysburg College, *The Spectrum*, 1944, 88, GCA.

<sup>21</sup> “The Gettysburgian,” *The Spectrum*, 1946, 66.

Furthermore, the Owl and Nightingale Players continued to have local productions.<sup>22</sup> Women stepped into leadership roles throughout campus during the war years. The Student Christian Association, or S.C.A., was a prominent group on campus during the 1930s and 40s. The organization was well known and respected on campus since, “When the S.C.A. observed the seventy-fifth anniversary of its founding in 1942, there were 236 active members.”<sup>23</sup> Despite the loss of men, the S.C.A. made progress on campus, with the first woman president, Dorothy J. Kenney, being elected in 1944.<sup>24</sup> Even a Sketch Club was founded in 1945, “by two enthusiastic critics, Joy Nelson and Frances Bantley.”<sup>25</sup> The increase in the number of women paired with the decrease in male attendance at the College between 1943 and 1944 provided an opportunity for women to develop their leadership skills and participate in extracurricular activities.

Women’s groups, specifically sororities, did not stop organizing during the war years. With three national sororities recognized in 1945, two-thirds of students were involved with Greek life throughout the late 1930s and early 1940s.<sup>26</sup> In an attempt to save gas for the war, many students left their automobiles at home and stayed on as residential students during the time they were away in order to help the war effort.<sup>27</sup> Because many of these women were relocated to fraternity houses due to the increase in male military students during the war, women were able to live together in spaces which had previously been excluded them. The relocation of women students to men’s fraternity house impacted campus culture because of the

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<sup>22</sup> Charles A. Glatfelter, *A Salutory Influence*, 639, 732.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 620.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> “Sketch Club,” *The Spectrum*, 1946. 71.

<sup>26</sup> The three sororities recognized on campus at the time were Delta Gamma, which the local sorority Beta Lambda joined in 1939, Chi Omega which the local sorority Gamma Phi joined in 1937, and Phi Phi Phi which joined Phi Mu nationally in 1945.

<sup>27</sup> Gas Rationing Card, Julia Koppelman Scrapbook 1939-1945, Box 2, GCA.

male opinion that the women were taking away something that was originally theirs. *The Gettysburgian* reflected the extent to which the campus residential life was changed, noting

The Delta Gamma Sorority will occupy the Phi Sigma Kappa house, while the Chi Omega Sorority will reside in the Phi Gamma Delta house, and the Tri Phi, local sorority, will take over the Sigma Chi house. A group of non-sorority girls including the Chi Alpha Sigma organization will live in the Lambda Chi house while other coeds will room in the Phi Delta House.<sup>28</sup>

With five of the fraternity houses occupied by women, only four remained for the civilian males who continued studying at Gettysburg during the war years. Overall, the sense of community between the women on campus increased due to the communal nature of campus, which ultimately led to an increase in the opportunities to thrive in supportive environments and extracurricular activities.

The opportunity for women to develop leadership skills at Gettysburg extended outside of the student body. The Woman's League, an alumni organization, engaged with the College during the war years.<sup>29</sup> At the 32<sup>nd</sup> Annual Convention of the Women's General League of Gettysburg College, the members requested that the young men and women serving be honored for their contributions to the war effort. With a theme of "The Good Fight of Faith," the members acknowledged the significant role of women on campus.<sup>30</sup> Dorothy Gregg Lee, the Dean of Women, noted that "the girls were taking over many of the editorial and other duties which in the former years were handled exclusively by the boys at the College, and that they

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<sup>28</sup> "College to Assume Control of All Fraternities In Sept. For Dorms, Boarding Clubs," *The Gettysburgian*, Oct. 1, 1943, 1.

<sup>29</sup> Charles A. Glatfelter, *A Salutory Influence*, 703. Between its founding in 1911 and 1945, the Women's League contributed over \$170,000 to the College.

<sup>30</sup> "The Women's League Conventions" Minutes November-December 1943, 3, GCA.

were doing a very acceptable job.”<sup>31</sup> Through encouraging the opportunities for women, as well as complimenting their performance on campus, the members of the Women’s League facilitated an environment of support for the women filling leadership roles.

The social life on campus continued to thrive despite the loss of male students during the war. Because of the men coming in through the Army’s program, many women found the ability to socialize with them throughout their day-to-day lives. Following the announcement that the military was going to be taking over part of the college, *The Mercury* noted, “the administration may plan Saturday evening dances in Gettysburg design...these events would be a ‘field day’ for Gettysburg coeds. In fact, the advent of the Army will make a ‘new era’ for the women’s division.”<sup>32</sup> As the number of Army men increased on campus, their presence became a crucial part of the college environment. Different social activities at the College tended to be more patriotic than in previous years. For example, “The Class of 1943 planned the Junior Prom on a national defense theme and began the custom of prohibiting corsages, requiring instead that money be used to purchase defense stamps at the dance.”<sup>33</sup> Similarly, “In 1943, ‘Victory’ became the slogan for the last Pan-Hellenic Dance sponsored by the fraternities during the duration [of the war].”<sup>34</sup> Both of these examples emphasized the significance the war effort played in not only the academic life of students, but also their social life. Female students were encouraged to interact with the Army men. This “Coed Paradise” emphasized that “every coed will have her chance... And girls, you know what these new soldiers since in their song-‘nothing can stop the Army Air Corps.’”<sup>35</sup> Overall, the publications at the College encouraged the women

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<sup>31</sup> “The Women’s League Conventions” Minutes November-December 1943, 32, GCA.

<sup>32</sup> “This is the Army,” *The Mercury*, Feb. 1943, 1.

<sup>33</sup> Amy Jane Moyer. “Chapters For a New Generation, 1942-1982.” In To Waken Fond Memory—Moments in the History of Gettysburg College (Gettysburg, PA. Gettysburg College, 2006), 154.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>35</sup> “Coed Paradise,” *The Mercury*, Feb. 1943, 1.

to participate in campus activities with the men who were staying at the college temporarily throughout the war years.

Social activities were not the only time that the women on campus engaged with the war. Josephine Fish Langdon Collitt remembered, in *The Last of the "Good Old Days"* when "every student on campus at that time...join[ed] the departing men on their way up to the railroad station."<sup>36</sup> Throughout the war, many of the women participated in activities such as a plasma drive and a scrap metal drive where the women cut their beds for the war effort.<sup>37</sup> Even the women who were displaced from their dormitories and moved to fraternity houses participated in the war effort. For example, a Phi Phi Phi member wrote in the 1944 *Spectrum*, "Remember the one selling defense stamps?...Millie Daub pinches the pennies for the girls," and "[Babs] did her good deed each day by serving as a waitress in the Aircrew mess hall."<sup>38</sup> The participation of women on the home front, particularly in regard to their presence at Gettysburg College, benefited those that had left campus, or were going to leave campus to fight in Europe or the Pacific.

The male students had mixed views regarding the changing role of women on campus. Chilly Argus, a writer for *The Gettysburgian*, noted in response to *The Gettysburgian's* poll asking what students thought about coeds eating in the fraternity houses, said it was "A painful wartime necessity which must be put in the same category as blackouts, bombings, and rationing...I guess we will have to put up with the coeds."<sup>39</sup> Others, had a more positive view, stating, "Who knows—with the gas and tire situation as it is, and no more pilgrimages to Hood

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<sup>36</sup> Josephine Fish Langdon Collitt. "The Ivory Tower Concept." In *The Last of the "Good Old Days" Gettysburg College 1939-1943* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Copy Right Printers Inc., 1997), 2.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>38</sup> "Phi Phi Phi Sorority," *The Spectrum*, 1944, 144.

<sup>39</sup> Chilly Argus, "Question Box," *The Gettysburgian*, March 4, 1943, 2.

and Wilson, there may be some good romances come out of it all.”<sup>40</sup> Not surprisingly, the men who had gone to war and learned of the changing times at the College were confused. In an open letter back to the College, three veterans wrote

It seems that the old familiar names of the paces we used to know so well, no longer appear in the headlines and throughout the pages of the paper. Such strange sounding names as Delta Gamma, Chi Omega, and Tri Phi houses...are certainly foreign to our ears...Are we now to believe that the spirit that was fostered by fraternities at Gettysburg are now driven out of existence by the war and the women?<sup>41</sup>

The increasing role of women on campus, both residentially and in leadership of extracurricular activities was controversial for many men both abroad and at the College; however, many of the men residing on campus for military purposes continued to perceive the presence of the women in a more positive light.

While *The Mercury* was paused in early 1943, and *The Spectrum* was not published in 1945, student publications emphasized the impact of the war on the campus community as a whole. The 1944 edition of *The Spectrum* strove to emphasize “a story of college days and dreams”<sup>42</sup> The yearbook attempted to avoid “war-borne harum-scarum [since] many who pick up this volume for the first time will be in the uniform of this, their country... It is for these men, whose memories of college days will be but faded dreams, that we have filled this...with only carefree campus life.”<sup>43</sup> By purposefully offering a more positive narrative for the sake of the Gettysburgians abroad, *The Spectrum* serves as an example of how history can be manipulated

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<sup>40</sup> Jerry Strickler. “Question Box,” *The Gettysburgian*, March 4, 1943, 2.

<sup>41</sup> H. Donald Mitman, Elmer S. McKee, Erle K. Diehl. “Open Letters,” *The Gettysburgian*, Nov. 4, 1943, 2.

<sup>42</sup> “A Word of Explanation,” *The Spectrum*, 1944, 161.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

by those who have written it. Through preventing the harsh realities of death and war from existing in the yearbook, historians must rely on other documents to display the everyday realities of the students at Gettysburg from 1943-1944. Overall, student publications provided accurate insight into the opinions of students at the time, as well as their priorities; however, because the yearbook is not professionally reviewed or published, it lacks an unbiased account of the war years on campus.

Despite many working women returning to the home following the end of the war, women's participation at institutions of higher education continued to thrive, specifically at Gettysburg College. College athletics continued to grow, eventually allowing women to participate in a wide-variety of intramural sports. Additionally, extracurricular clubs, such as the Sketch Club, began organizing under the leadership of women on campus. Women began to seek more independence and their attendance at Gettysburg College rose. For example, even throughout the end of the war during the 1944-1945 academic year, the rate of enrollment increased, since "the attendance of enrolled students has increased to 238 women and 164 men this year, compared with approximately 191 women and 99 men last year."<sup>44</sup> The impact of the war years positively benefitted the confidence of many young women as they went to college and pursued undergraduate degrees, specifically in the case of Gettysburg College.

Throughout the mid-1940s the United States engaged in a total war. Civilians on the home front and soldiers in both Europe and the Pacific fought for democracy. While women did work in factories in order to help with war-time production, many women were also attending college as undergraduate students. The participation of college-aged men in fighting the war,

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<sup>44</sup> College Enrollment Soars to New War Time High," *The Gettysburgian*, Oct. 5, 1944, 1.

either through enlisting or the draft, provided women the opportunity to go to college and become the leaders they may not have been otherwise. Whether it was in extracurricular activities such as the A Capella Choir, college athletics, or student publications such as *The Gettysburgian*, women were able to thrive in leadership roles. While some men, particularly those that had been displaced from their fraternity houses were not thrilled with the increased presence of women on campus, those who were there for shorter periods, such as the Army Air Corps, encouraged the participation of women. Whether women were participating in the war effort through rationing or increasing moral through attending social events such as the Pan-Hellenic Military Ball, female students began moving away from their passive role on campus and moving into an active force at Gettysburg. Overall, documentation of World War II at Gettysburg College provides a case in which World War II directly impacted the redefinition of the roles of women at an institution of higher education.

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