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## ‘Maybe It Was Too Much to Expect in Those Days’: The Changing Lifestyles of Barnard’s First Female Students

Jennifer Prevete FCRH '12  
Fordham University, [furj12@fordham.edu](mailto:furj12@fordham.edu)

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### **Cover Page Footnote**

Jennifer Preverte, FCRH '12, is a native of Roslyn, NY, majoring in American studies with a minor in business administration. Her senior research project, a version of which appears in this issue of FURJ, analyzes both first-hand perspectives and secondary data to examine the challenges and opportunities facing the first students of Barnard College in Manhattan – members of only the second generation of women to attend college in the United States. After receiving her diploma in May, she will be preparing to begin law school in the fall.

Jennifer Prevete, FCRH '12

# 'Maybe It Was Too Much to Expect in Those Days' The Changing Lifestyles of Barnard's First Female Students

From 1890 to 1920 higher education witnessed a marked increase in female matriculation among select East Coast institutions. This paper explores the personal narratives of these pioneering women to illustrate how societal forces strongly influenced these women's college experiences. Existing discourse emphasizes the difficulties female university students faced as they tried to pursue both careers and families. Scholars claim that an unusual number of college-educated women did not marry or married at a later age. This paper examines first-hand perspectives drawn from the Barnard College Archives to supplement current secondary data. Alumnae biographical questionnaires reveal how women reconciled opportunities with societal pressures. Compromises included socio-political activism as mediatory outlets for energy. Ultimately, while a college degree allowed women at the turn of the twentieth century to pursue a life with a career as the focal point, graduates became pulled between tradition and opportunity; a woman's college education was seemingly incompatible with the female roles of the family unit.

From 1890 to 1920, the female graduates who matriculated from institutions along the East Coast became some of the first women to attend college in the United States. Existing discourse emphasizes the difficulties women faced while pursuing both a career and a family after graduation. These women engaged in new educational initiatives during a time when the female's role remained within the domestic sphere. Consequently, they struggled with the costs of their unusual choice. I explore the complex social pressures surrounding women pursuing higher education during this time period. I first examine statistics about marriage and family from this time period. From the available data involving the turn of the century, scholars suggest that an unusual number of college-educated women did not marry following their graduation or at a later age. In order to provide context for these numbers and explain alterations of the woman's place in society, I describe the creation and the nature of women's colleges in the mid-nineteenth century. Aside from the existing interventions on this topic, I used accounts from the first students at Barnard College, founded in 1889, to supply a better understanding of a college education's effects upon women of the time period. Biographical questionnaires allowed alumnae to comment upon their experience decades after attending Barnard. These firsthand accounts help explain the trajectories of family and employment in an individual's life. They also help uncover why so few of these women acted as both a professional and a wife and mother.

Ultimately, higher education conferred a new way of life that some women embraced through socio-political activism and employment after graduation. Oftentimes, employed women defied domestic roles and never married. Many who did marry attempted to enact their education through organizational activities. The graduates' feelings toward their alma mater are complex, but their individual responses illuminate the social pressures they experienced at the time. Consequently, I assert that while a college degree allowed women at the turn of the twentieth century to pursue a life with career as the focal point as opposed to family, graduates became pulled between tradition and opportunity because a woman's college education was not compatible with female roles in the family unit.

## Patterns of Family and Employment and The Evolution of Women's Education

Generally, the first several generations of women to attend college in the United States were white, emerging from middle socio-economic status (Gordon, 2002). As increasing numbers of women began to attend college at the turn of the century, patterns involving marriage and reproduction rates emerged. Present-day scholars work to identify these patterns and isolate the socio-economic forces behind them. Various sources approximate that "60 to 70% of the first generation of graduates from women's colleges did not marry and many pursued specifically identifiable careers" (Conway, 1974). Mary Cookingham conducted a population study in the 1980s which tracks the "V-shaped pattern" of marriage rates for women graduates from 1865 to 1910. According to Cookingham's work, nuptials for these women were at the lowest point from 1885 to 1910. This pattern indicates some unique elements of education or society within that time period to produce the trend (Cookingham, 1984). Cookingham favors an economic explanation: the "marked decrease in the opportunity cost of remaining single for college women" (Cookingham, 1984). According to Cookingham, women balanced social and institutional restrictions with the amount of available opportunities. She supports this idea because the employment for young educated women coincided with the lower nuptial rates. Variations in the labor market determined whether or not it was in women's ability to postpone marriage in favor of pursuing employment (Cookingham, 1984). Claudia Goldin engages in her own study and divides different generations of graduates into cohorts on the basis of their career and family outcomes throughout the twentieth century. Without the opportunity to embrace a family and a career simultaneously, graduates of the first twentieth century cohort, from 1900 to 1920, made the decision between the two. In other words, women secured either marriage or career but not both simultaneously (Goldin, 2004). Goldin analyzes the marriage and reproduction rates in each cohort and compares the differences in rates among educated and uneducated women of the time period. She observed that more than 30% of female graduates in the 1900 to 1920 cohort never married by the age of fifty. Only about 8% of

\* Thank you to Professors Julie Kim and Oneka LaBennett and the Barnard College Archives.

the female counterpart with no college education remained single by the age of 50. By age 40, over 50% of the college women in the 1900 to 1920 cohort were childless. In contrast, the work-rate for those women who graduated college and did get married is low, with only 20% of married graduates working at age 45 (Goldin, 5004). The generation of women graduating from 1890 to 1920 was particularly significant because their marriage and birthing rates indicate some of the non-traditional choices they made. These notable patterns begin toward the end of the nineteenth century, but women's entrance into higher education involved preceding events. The social implications of women's admittance into college correspond to the pressures they experienced.

According to present-day scholarship, women's involvement in family and career varied over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Women who graduated from college between the years of 1890 to 1920 comprise the second generation of collegiate females. Development of women's higher education emerged after a number of societal transformations in the nineteenth century. Beginning in 1820, girls increasingly received schooling beyond bare literacy (Green, 1979). The educational reformers who advocated this change hoped girls' continued schooling would help stabilize and reaffirm the traditional authoritative positions of the community, church, and family. In short, education would enhance a woman's abilities to act in her previously designated roles, mother and wife of a household, for the overall benefit of society. While female education at this time emphasized maintenance of traditional domestic roles, Nancy Green remarks that the young women's assimilation into secondary school acted as a precursor to the movement for women's colleges (Green, 1979). Paradoxically, the educational reform efforts of the mid-nineteenth century intended to stabilize the family unit would eventually lead women outside the home. Once greater numbers of women began to attend college, leaders in politics, education, and eugenics noted changes in women's marriage and reproduction rates.

The movement for women's colleges emerged from the antebellum and Civil War eras in the United States as a consequence of shifting societal values during the nineteenth century. The ideal woman of the Victorian era engaged in "passive femininity" as she dedicated herself to traditional domestic duties (Abrams, 1979). At this time, coeducational institutions advocated, above any other purpose, schooling for women's betterment in her existing traditional roles in society. Jill Conway observes that the period following the Civil War generated a shift in education as greater numbers of women pursued independent careers. Previously, women were mothers to their biological families and nurtured the next generation of civically and morally responsible citizens. During the Civil War, female activists began to challenge their gender roles through "their attempts to act out the now-accepted women's role of guardian of society's moral standards through a concern for the situation of slaves" (Conway, 1974). Entrance into the political sphere through abolitionist movements marked a change in consciousness for women. Feminists who challenged their subordinate position faced opposition. While the conclusion of the Civil War brought an end to some of this activism, these revolutions in thought led to significant consequences for college females. The conflict over feminine roles continued after the Civil War as intellectual life became professionalized. Women who pursued higher education had more opportunities to use their aca-

demical disciplines within their occupations (Conway, 1974). From the social changes following the Civil War, scholars note the first definitive group of college women. Similar to the women who participated in the feminist abolition movements, women who did attend college at this time faced the difficulties of pursuing an unpopular course in life. The first generation of women to attend college in the United States, from 1860 to 1890, was not of the highest socioeconomic class. Families of elite status believed higher education would potentially "make women unmarriageable" (Gordon, 2002). From 1859 onwards, women contended with fears that education would make women unfit or malcontent to remain within the home. From these sentiments, some promoted women's education as a way to enhance traditional socio-cultural roles (Gordon, 2002). Many of the coeducational institutions of the nineteenth century thus emphasized the differences between men and women, even as changes to education in the 1860s and 1870s increased career opportunities for women (Abrams, 1979).

Coeducational schools first arose in the 1830s beginning with Oberlin College in 1833, however, women in the eastern United States struggled to find institutions conferring degrees of equal merit to women until the emergence of the Seven Sisters from 1865 to 1894 (McCabe, 1893). The Seven Sisters colleges—Mount Holyoke, Vassar, Wellesley, Smith, Radcliffe, Bryn Mawr, and Barnard—were designed for the education of women from their inception. Contemporary sources explicitly praised the Seven Sisters for promoting the academic development of women and maintaining the standards of the men's colleges of the day (McCabe, 1893). In contrast, coeducational Oberlin dedicated its academic efforts towards creating a domestic workforce for men. Their curriculum included laundry duties, during which female students would wash and repair male students' clothing, as well as the daily tasks of cooking and cleaning (Conway, 1974). Many who supported female higher education did not advocate a curriculum identical to that of men's colleges. According to G. Stanley Hall, who founded the Child Study Institute at Clark University, the biological and sociological differences of women needed to be considered in educational components. He saw education as an opportunity to train young women for their roles in motherhood. To him and many others, the delay and denial of marriage in female college graduates was one of the major detriments of equal education (Jenkins, 1979). Some colleges incorporated domestic science into the curriculum in order to refocus women on their duties of motherhood in a time of increased worry over the declining rate of reproduction (Jenkins, 1979). Women who graduated after 1890 could receive training that demanded independent effort. This education's purpose could not be fulfilled "within the narrow confines of domestic life" (Conway, 1974). College education prepared women to pursue careers as teachers, social workers, nurses, librarians, and secretaries. The Seven Sisters allowed graduates to become more involved in their occupations and society.

### Barnard College and the Archives

An analysis of Barnard College, from its first graduating class in 1893 to 1920, shows how perceptions of women's education developed over time. From its inception in 1889, Barnard College existed as one of several colleges within Columbia University in New York City. The addition emerged after a failure to introduce coed-

education to Columbia College, although the institution's president at the time, Frederick A. P. Barnard, campaigned diligently for women's integration. President Barnard exemplified the visionaries who supported coeducation. He "believed [women] would thrive at Columbia" and that female presence in colleges was "distinctly conducive to good order" (Rosenberg, 2004). Throughout his presidency, Barnard became progressively more inclusive of those who could serve as contributing members to Columbia's reputation for excellence and leadership. Opposite President Barnard was John Burgess of Columbia's School of Political Science. To Burgess, a university was the domain of "'the best of men,' which is to say well-familied, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant males" (McCaughey, 2003). In this case, the intersection of gender and race debates seen in the Civil War continued as the exclusivity debate engaged women and even ethnic minorities. With learned professions becoming more common, the question of expansion extended to women as well. Barnard College conducted classes in a rented brownstone at 343 Madison Avenue, until the institution moved to Morningside Heights in 1898 (McCaughey, 2003). Despite the physical separation of Barnard College from Columbia's campus, the classes, curriculum, and instructors were to be in every way the female counterpart of the already existing university entities (Rosenberg, 2004). Barnard's curriculum included classes in mathematics, English, and languages. It also admitted a limited number of students into special subjects such as botany (Rosenberg, 2004). The school provided these women with a number of new opportunities with corresponding challenges. Barnard not only used Columbia's curriculum and instructors, but its critical method of teaching. Female students struggled with mild culture shock upon encountering the unfamiliar collegiate atmosphere and analyses. Even the chance encounter with males could serve as a source of stress. For example, social standards of propriety did not prepare women for interactions with unfamiliar men that held the door for them on the way out of the university library (Rosenberg, 2004). A Barnard education also led to changes in thought. At times, when opportunity allowed, women withstood the pressure to remain inside the home and embarked on career paths in which they would either postpone or forego marriage.

Created in 1963, the Barnard College Archives is now the permanent home for all records of the college (Archives). Within the Archives, the records of the Associate Alumnae of Barnard College provide a wealth of information about life outcomes of the graduates. Based upon the existence of the Alumnae Employment Committee, the College undertook efforts to send women into the working world. The records of Appointment Work of the Committee in Employment for the years 1919 to 1920 display some of the Associate Alumnae's achievements. Reflective of the obstacles of the time, the numbers of both the applications and placements of women seeking temporary positions increased from 1919 to 1920 while permanent full-time positions declined. According to records, women most commonly found placement as teachers, governesses, and clerks. Notably there were many more applications than placements as women struggled to find openings in the market (Associate Alumnae, 1921). Among its other functions, the Associate Alumnae employed its available resources to advance the position of graduates who sought activities outside the home. The Archives contains alumnae magazines and bulletins as well as information about individual Barnard experiences. My

most significant resources are the Biographical Questionnaires, conducted by the Associate Alumnae.

The Associate Alumnae sent out questionnaires in 1956 and received responses back from all the graduating classes, including the very first in 1893. The earliest graduation years submitted the fewest responses, due most likely to the small class size and to old age (average 85 years) of the alumnae at the time of the questionnaire. The questionnaires of the women who did reply included the answers to over 60 questions. They provided vital statistics about self and family, education, activities as alumnae, organizational and leisure time activities, employment, and home-making. The final section asked graduates about their opinions of Barnard. I examined 40 questionnaires in detail of the graduating classes from 1893 through 1920. Notable patterns of work and activity emerged from their listed information. The specific responses of the alumnae at the end of the questionnaires revealed an individual's opinions about college education and female societal roles. Oftentimes, an individual's perspective of her time at Barnard depended upon her life ambitions and how far college took her towards her goals. From the supplementary responses at the end of the questionnaires, the simplified categorization of the reason why a student would not choose Barnard again ranged from: I would not choose Barnard again because it did not properly prepare me for a life of domesticity, or I would not choose Barnard again because it did not provide me with the range of opportunities I desired. In other words, students remarked upon their preference for either traditional values or increased opportunity. The women most likely to report no regrets worked for many years and remained unmarried. Respondents often found education either valuable or lacking, dependent upon their life trajectories following graduation.

Many women who graduated from Barnard found employment or engaged in organizational activities clearly influenced by their time at Barnard. These women, usually single, noted their satisfaction of how higher education helped them advance in life. One of the first students, Eva S. Potter, exemplifies this type of alumna. Eva Potter graduated in 1896 and became the Second President of the Alumnae Association. Miss Potter never married or worked, but she became extremely involved in her community. She along with another alumna organized the Employment Committee of the Alumnae Association, which was later taken over by Barnard College. Miss Potter dedicated an entire extra page in her questionnaire to elaborate upon her activities with the Friends of Children's Museums and Pilgrim Slate Hospital. Her extensive answers and activism speak to her pride in attending college and extending her efforts to society. Her participation in the social sphere became a full-time endeavor enhanced by Barnard (Associate Alumnae). Other graduates who obtained jobs gave similar praises about their educational experiences. Eliza J. Jones, class of 1894, taught full-time in a high school from 1905 to 1936. She never married, but agreed that Barnard could not have trained her better for life than it did (Associate Alumnae). In the 1900s, Barnard graduates reported more diversity in their jobs but still maintained the same positive attitude towards their alma mater. Some women in the education field secured greater responsibility. For example, Esther W. Hawes, a graduate of the class of 1914, worked in College Administration from 1921 to 1952. She was also actively involved in several women's associations (Associate Alumnae). Others ex-

explored the non-traditional realms of math and science, such as Evelyn M. Baldwin who graduated in 1920 and never married. At the time of the survey, she still worked as a full-time employee of Bell Telephone Lab on the technical staff team. She too noted her approval of education at a women's college (Associate Alumnae). While various women had positive responses, others elaborated upon domestic pressures.

Several survey respondents commented upon qualities they found lacking in a Barnard education. One of the most common complaints was a lack of preparation in domesticity. While Edyth Fredericks, a single teacher from the class of 1906, ultimately approved of the way Barnard educated its students, she recognized a need for Barnard to accommodate the values of the time. She wrote, "American Civ would have been useful, also courses in home-making" (Associate Alumnae). She noticed her education's incompatibilities with reality. Some Barnard graduates achieved both a family and employment, however, these women were not wholly satisfied with their college instruction. Elizabeth S. (Day) Fowles, class of 1905, married at age 24 and had four children. In her spare time, she joined a women's club and the school board of her children's school. She worked part-time, but her life revolved around the home. She would have rather attended "a college offering domestic science courses" because "circumstances led me into a life where a classical education did not help me" (Associate Alumnae). Also from the class of 1905, married Christian worker Florence I. (Nye) Whitwell was of a similar disposition as Mrs. Fowles and desired more home economics classes (Associate Alumnae). These married graduates felt that college did not practically serve their domestic livings. An alumna from the class of 1920 desired the same changes. After graduating, Lois M. (Wood) Clark married and taught English in high school for nine years. In her opinion, Barnard could have trained her better for life because "there were no courses which served as preparation for marriage and home-making" (Associate Alumnae). As a woman who married between the ages of 26 and 30 years, she may have felt disadvantaged for marrying later in life. As alumnae responded to the questionnaires, they recognized the fact that college education in the early 1900s was not necessarily compatible with their lifestyles.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, several ambitious women felt that Barnard did not allow them to advance enough in life. Alice (Kohn) Pollitzer, graduate of the first class in 1893, commented upon what areas Barnard should focus on in consideration of several deficiencies. Mrs. Pollitzer had two daughters and completed various types of work in the fields of education and social work. She commented, "In my day Barnard ignored the important areas of sex, religion, and politics, including the issues of the time" (Associate Alumnae). She experienced Barnard in its first stages of development and, perhaps, its most tentative instruction. An account from graduate Adelaide Hart class of 1906 summarizes the opposing pressures for females pursuing higher education during that time. Miss Hart remained single and became a teacher. Miss Hart struggled to reconcile the "purely academic" subjects she studied with her need "to earn a living" (Associate Alumnae). According to her, the practical and cultural sides of life did not necessarily reconcile upon graduation. Later graduates sought to enter new areas of employment but simultaneously encountered social and educational limitations. Graduate of the class of 1905,

Marion (Franklin) Loew exemplifies this situation. She married at age 21 and had two children. She received her medical degree in 1920 and found employment in the clinical and research fields. Mrs. Loew worked from 1930 to 1953 under the New York City and New York State Health Departments as Assistant Director. She remarked that if she could enter college again, she would have chosen coeducational college (Associate Alumnae). Certain fields, such as the sciences, were more difficult for women to enter. As a result, a coeducational college might have provided a better opportunity to various professions. Several alumnae, including Mrs. Loew, highlight this relationship among career ambition and coeducational colleges. Graduate of the class of 1917, Therese (Hiebel) Bernhard married between the ages of 26 and 30 to an electrical engineer and had one son. She worked as a full-time mathematician for Bell Telephone Lab and eventually found a passion in painting. Her mathematical skill and artistic talent led her to long for a different career. She wrote, "If I had to do it over again, my choice of occupation would be in architecture and training in that field could be had to better advantage in a coeducational college ... maybe it was too much to expect in those days" (Associate Alumnae). Mrs. Bernhard realized that she would have enjoyed working in a field that was unusual for women in her time. Decades later, women possessing this amount of ambition perceived the obstacles that prevented them from reaching their goals.

Respondents often encountered a world that was unwilling to accept their increased participation in society. While several women succeeded against social pressures by both raising a family and obtaining a fulfilling career, others found purpose in organizational activities for extensive and important causes. These alumnae engaged in lives of domesticity but found a mediatory outlet for their energy. In general, contemporary sources provide that a majority of women during this time period pursued a job for an "outlet in energy" rather than "financial necessity" (Collier, 1926). Bertha S. (Van Riper) Overbury, class of 1896 was a wealthy alumna who possessed a house of high value as well as a housekeeper and chauffeur. Mrs. Overbury married but never had children. She never worked but participated in a number of organizations, commenting the most on her involvement in Friends of Huntington Library and the Manuscript Society. Her collection of over 2000 books included works of notable American women authors. She also held autographed manuscripts from Harriet Beecher Stowe and Emily Dickinson. Mrs. Overbury donated her compiled works to Barnard College where it exists today as part of the special collections (Associate Alumnae). These efforts became Mrs. Overbury's expression of her education. Similarly, Ruth A. (Reeder) Arbuckle, class of 1905, balanced marital life with social activism. Mrs. Arbuckle never worked or had children, but she did participate in religious and socio-political organizations. Over 50 years after she graduated she wrote: "The men and women who planned the curriculum and policies of Barnard at the turn of the century were conditioned by the fact that they could not possibly have foreseen ... the tremendous changes in the status and role of women" (Associate Alumnae). Mrs. Arbuckle noted advancements in women's status since her time. Women such as Arbuckle and Overbury found methods outside limited employment to use their college education.

### Conclusion: Accomplishing Something Remarkable

The questionnaires as a whole revealed some of the common behaviors and factors of the graduates. A look at the employment experiences of women also elaborates on the difficulties of assimilation and advancement in various fields. The teaching profession recruited high numbers of Barnard graduates. The educators that emerged from Barnard College in general had a positive response to their single-sex education, and expressed contentment with their life and education choices. After the first decade of Barnard's existence, areas of employment extended beyond the teaching realm. With this variation in occupation, the opinions of graduates varied as well. Because the respondents answered the surveys in 1956, the alumnae answer their questions with the knowledge that more colleges have opened their doors to women since the time that they attended Barnard. As a result, those women who sought more ambitious employment, unusual for women at the time, often elected not to attend Barnard again should they have had the opportunity. As opportunities increased, more women acknowledged the limitations they had faced at the time and commented upon their hardships in their responses.

Some alumnae never worked a day in their lives, instead, they joined organizations as outlets for energy. This involvement is particularly significant for women who reconciled domesticity with activity outside the home. Political groups included the Republicans Club, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the American Association of University Women (AAUW), the League of Women Voters, and various Women's Societies. Social and philanthropic causes were Children's Welfare League, Children's Museums, Red Cross, the Young Men's Christian Association, Service League, Overseas Division, and Parent-Teacher Association. Church organizations featured prominently as well from involvement in Methodist and Unitarian denominations to membership in the Catholic Daughters of America (Associate Alumnae). The varied and extensive mediatory activities complicate the life narratives of purely-career or purely-family. Organization memberships, especially in political form, echo the efforts of women as moral guardians for society during the Civil War. Community participation demonstrated the influence college education could have beyond employment.

Students emerged from Barnard changed by the years that they spent there. Women could have high expectations of their opportunities after college, however, those ambitions became tempered by realistic expectations of the time period. Adelaide Hart, class of 1906, wrote, "I am proud of being a Barnard graduate even though I have not set the world on fire with anything remarkable" (Associate Alumnae). The women who graduated from Barnard and from other colleges at this time may not have set the world on fire, but they did accomplish something remarkable. During a time in which women's higher education for purposes beyond traditional feminine roles seemed unnatural, the first Barnard students enrolled in an institution that worked to further their potential. While many alumnae assumed traditional feminine roles, others embraced lives as single women, professionals, or activists. Barnard students at the turn of the century helped lay the groundwork for later generations of college women to succeed in new, non-traditional areas.

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