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*Mississippi University for Women*

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# Diverse Collections in the Mississippi University for Women Archives

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In the history of higher education in America, Mississippi University for Women (MUW) occupies a peculiar, though rarely acknowledged, position. The University's history provides uniquely fertile ground for studies of diverse groups and their interactions in institutions of higher education, but the lack of a functioning archives has long impeded such study. It was a pioneer in women's colleges, intended to serve the educational needs of all economic classes, teaching Latin and penmanship alongside dressmaking and stenography. It also offers the distinctive perspective of a college explicitly founded for white women that underwent integration in the 1960s, which is still largely unexplored in MUW's case. Finally, it is distinctive in being both the first publicly funded women's college in the United States, and also the last one. While several men's colleges, in particular The Citadel and Virginia Military Institute, were eventually compelled to admit women in the face of the Fourteenth Amendment, MUW is unique in being a women's university similarly forced to admit men. Now that the MUW Archives is again manned and operational, several significant collections addressing the diverse history of the University can be explored, including the Peyton Family Collection and the presidential papers of Charles Hogarth and James Strobel.

## **Recent Developments in the MUW Archives**

The MUW Archives contains several collections pertinent to this history, but until recently the archives has been unmanned and neglected. MUW hired a full-time archivist, Gloria Atkinson, and founded its archives in 1979, and over the next decade she accumulated many of the University's early records as well as solicited scrapbooks, social club effects, and other memorabilia from alumni. When Atkinson retired in 1991, however, the University administration was undergoing both a change in presidents and navigating one of the numerous campaigns to close the University in the legislature, and her position was left open. When, in 1993, a tornado struck the campus and damaged the roof of Orr Building, where the archives is housed, it was decided to close the archives rather than repair the roof. Subsequent storms in 1996 and 2002 further damaged the roof before it was finally repaired in the summer of 2012. The accumulation of twenty years of exposure to the elements and lack of security or climate control has not been kind to the records.

Nevertheless, some in the University recognized the value of the archives' holdings, taking measures to protect it, and the archives' fortunes have improved dramatically in recent months. Dr. Bridget Smith Pieschel, Professor of English and Director of the Center for Women's Research and Public Policy, relocated her office to Orr's still-habitable annex after the archives was closed, and from this redoubt made regular excursions into the archives to preserve the records when possible, using student interns to triage problem areas and assist the occasional researcher in accessing the records. Last fall, a new university archivist was hired part-time, and elevated to full-time status in January. The archives' governing policies were updated, a volunteer and student interns were recruited, and many of the collections re-opened to student research. Now the archives is preparing to move to a new temporary space, and will be installed in a new permanent home in the Fant Memorial Library once its renovation is completed.

## **The Peyton Collection and the Founding of the University**

MUW was founded in 1884 as the "Industrial Institute and College for the Education of White Girls in the State of Mississippi in the Arts and Sciences," a jarringly candid invocation of the school's originating purpose. It would fill a gap in the demographic needs of the state education system, for while white Mississippi boys had colleges at Oxford and Starkville, and black colleges for both sexes had already been founded at Alcorn, Jackson (Tougaloo), and Holly Springs, there were no colleges in Mississippi for white

girls to attend.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the new school was intended to serve the educational needs of girls of all economic classes, being both an "industrial institute" -- a vocational school for poorer students to learn a trade -- and a "college" for students either to gain either a normal (i.e., teacher's) degree or more generalized education in arts and sciences of the same quality as that offered by more expensive private women's colleges.<sup>2</sup> It was of special concern to the school's advocates that the University be affordable enough for the poorest students.<sup>3</sup>

The papers of Annie Coleman Peyton contain the records of one of the University's founders and provide an interesting perspective on the cause of women's education in the South in the 19th century. Peyton was a leading advocate for a public women's university in Mississippi, and her efforts led to the passage of legislation establishing the Industrial Institute and College in Columbus in 1884. The papers are part of the Peyton Collection, originally compiled by her daughter Mary Lou Peyton, who served as instructor of Mississippi history at the I. I. & C. (at this point Mississippi State College for Women) from 1938-1945. Along with papers from Mary Lou and various other family members, the collection includes Annie's memoirs, a biography of Annie written by Mary Lou titled *A Mississippi Woman*, some 220 letters, various papers on training and education, financial papers, speeches, and clippings of her many newspaper editorials signed simply "A Mississippi Woman."

Annie Coleman Peyton's papers illustrate some of the class and cultural contradictions at play in the movement to establish the I. I. & C. Though part of the national movement for women's colleges, and women's rights in general, Peyton articulates a message at times in conflict with the larger movement. While prior women's colleges were focused on the education of wealthy women, particularly in the South, Peyton argues strongly in favor of educating women from the poorer classes together with the wealthy. Included alongside her earlier work is a pamphlet by New York governor and Democratic presidential nominee Horatio Seymour on education in New York state, wherein the various colleges around the state are lauded as part of one great state university governed by a single board, dedicated to the education of all social classes in "all useful pursuits."<sup>4</sup> Peyton herself argues for industrial education in her "A Mississippi Woman" letters: "there is a Meconian [sic] cry in Mississippi for educated, practical women, to be mothers to the sons and daughters of the State. Avenues are opening, too, so that women may become bread-winners, producers instead of consumers, and the State owes it to them, and to herself, to fit them for some work in life."<sup>5</sup> In fact, the very reason she fought for a public university for women was so that the state could subsidize the education of women who would have to support themselves after college.

Rather than writing as part of the nationwide women's rights movement, Annie Peyton intentionally distanced herself from it in her speeches. While campaigning for Whitworth College to be given to the state of Mississippi to become publicly funded, for instance, she positioned herself against the movement and its most famous faces, wielding herself many of the same arguments its male detractors frequently used against it: "We appear before you not as bold, masculine, unwomanly women. Not as Susan B. Anthony or Victoria C. Woodhull might, clamoring for universal Suffrage or for the inauguration of customs that would sap the foundation of virtuous society -- but as earnest advocates of the cause of female education."<sup>6</sup> Many proponents of women's education utilized this approach to allay the fears of social conservatives,<sup>7</sup> but it is nevertheless striking to see the same tactic wielded here and note that its wielder was as successful in Mississippi as others were in Massachusetts and Ohio.

### **Racial Integration at Mississippi State College for Women**

One aspect of the school's mission was altered in 1966 when it admitted its first three African American students: Laverne Greene, Diane Hardy, and Barbara Turner. Although the integration of Mississippi universities gained worldwide attention at the time and have been widely studied in the years since, particularly the events surrounding the admission of James Meredith to the University of Mississippi in 1962, there has been to date no significant studies of the integration four years later of Mississippi's public women's college founded explicitly "for the education of white girls."<sup>8</sup>

The papers of Charles Hogarth, president from 1952 to 1977, not only comprise the single largest collection in the MUW Archives, but also include material on the racial integration of MSCW. The collection is spread across 91 boxes and comprises correspondence, reports, committee minutes, and other records from every year of his presidency. One of the rooms in which this collection is housed sustained significant damage during the interregnum, and while cleanup is ongoing a significant part of the collection remains temporarily unavailable. Nevertheless, accessible parts of the collection contain records relevant to the subject, and folder lists available in finding aids imply many additional relevant records in the boxes still to be rescued.

It is clear from the records currently available, for instance, that while the first African American students at MSCW were studiously ignored by much of the campus, the president's office was monitoring their progress with great interest. Included in President Hogarth's student files from 1966 are the correspondence and acceptance records not only of the three students who were eventually admitted, but also of the many unsuccessful applicants during the two to three years preceding them, each one assiduously noted as being likely black. Hogarth also received frequent, often weekly, updates on the grades and attendance of Greene, Hardy, and Turner.<sup>9</sup>

### **Coeducation and the Aftermath**

In 1981, Mississippi University for Women was forced to allow men admission by the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. The decision was confirmed the following year in a landmark, high profile decision by the United States Supreme Court, *Mississippi University for Women v. Hogan*. This change proved far more traumatic than integration, provoking a prolonged "identity crisis" within the University and frequent attempts in the legislature to close the school or fold it into Mississippi State University, with the latest attempt occurring as recently as 2010.

The transition to coeducational status and the events following it is attested in several collections in the MUW Archives, including that of President James Strobel (1977-1988). The Strobel papers, some 27 boxes of correspondence, reports, committee minutes, and news clippings focusing on the period from 1977 to 1980, are a smaller collection than Hogarth's, and there is notably less material relevant to this subject. Nevertheless, there is some fodder for research into the Hogan case and the aftermath. These records impart the perception of the Hogan case as an integral part of a larger existential threat to the University posed by the combination of falling enrollment, economic hardship, loss of identity, and a board set on closing the school. One such document titled "MUW: A Plan for Action and Reaction" notes the University's "adversities" by academic year and the action plan for dealing with them.<sup>10</sup> The Hogan case appears twice in it, along with issues like falling enrollment, budget cuts, and recommendations from the Board of Trustees to close the University. Other documents include a letter sent from the president to the alumnae urging a letter-writing campaign requesting legislation to retain MUW as a single sex institution, including talking points and contact information for politicians; materials relating to the first attempt in his administration by the board to close the school; and numerous newspaper clippings.<sup>11</sup>

The characterization of male enrollment as an "adversity" alongside declining budgets and enrollment is curious, considering that opening admissions to half of the state's population would seem to buttress, rather than further erode, enrollment. In fact, enrollment numbers indeed stabilized in the wake of the Supreme Court decision, as the statistics in the action plan itself make clear, yet the prose fails to make the connection. A February 1982 article in the *Commercial Dispatch* elsewhere in the collection, titled "Senate Committee Kills MUW Bill," further substantiates the boon to enrollment, noting that "some 280" males were already enrolled for fall semester, a significant supplement to a student body that had declined to 1500 students.

While coeducation boosted enrollment, it further endangered the University's standing with state officials.

Of particular worry to those resisting the change to coeducation was the fear that, with the University's identity as a women's university removed, the state would be inclined to dispense with it entirely.<sup>12</sup> Even some of the W's allies agreed that the University's existence lacked justification without an explicit, and exclusive, women's mission. State senator Ellis Bodron, who introduced legislation re-establishing MUW as a women's university everywhere but in the School of Nursing, admitted: "If 'the W' cannot continue as a single sex school, then I question the wisdom of its continuing at all."<sup>13</sup> In fact, recommendations from the board or legislation to close MUW or merge it with MSU would occur three times in the decade following the Hogan decision, beginning with a recommendation made that very year, and at regular intervals afterward.

### **The Future of Diverse Collections at the MUW Archives**

Once the MUW Archives moves into a new facility, attention can be turned to acquiring materials documenting the experiences of diverse students at the W. Students in history and women's studies classes have taken a particular interest in this subject, and are being marshaled by enterprising professors to conduct oral histories of such groups. One of our seniors is currently collecting oral histories of gay and lesbian students and alumni, which will be donated at the end of the 2013-2014 academic year and will be our first holdings in the area of GLBT history. Meanwhile, every year the Southern Women's Institute interviews the "Golden Girls" -- the attendees of the fifty-year class reunion -- which are kept with the archives. Beginning in 2016, that reunion will consist of alumnae who were seniors during integration, and soon after that, our first African American Golden Girls. So far, there is less interest among the students in the experiences of the first male students, but the archives is interested in pursuing the subject as a project for interns. Both the quick rise in enrollment of men and the fact that the transition to coeducation was a relatively recent event imply that interview subjects should be plentiful.

### **Conclusion**

The history of Mississippi University for Women, its students, and alumni comprise interesting subjects for research into multiple diverse groups. It was a rare avenue to a college education for poor southern girls together with young aristocrats in the postbellum South. It provides a look into racial integration from the perspective of a public women's college. It includes a unique encounter with men as a begrudged minority population under an administration that viewed their presence as an existential threat to the University. It is an opportunity to explore the experience of GLBT students at a public, former women's university in the Deep South.

Though recent history has been a dark period for higher education in general and the MUW Archives in particular, the darkest days appear to have passed. The archives is once again open, and the collections documenting this rich history are again being preserved and made accessible to researchers. As the archives makes its home in a new facility, it will begin increasing its holdings in diverse collections, enhancing its contribution to the study of diversity in higher education in the region and nation at large.

1) Neilson, Sarah. "The History of Mississippi State College for Women, Arranged According to the Presidential Administrations" (unpublished book, Columbus, MS, 1952), 5.

2) Pieschel, Bridget Smith and Stephen Robert Pieschel. *Loyal Daughters: 100 Years at Mississippi University for Women 1884-1984* (Jackson: University Press, 1984), 8.

3) e.g., Nash, Wiley. "Speech in support of Senate Bill No. 311, delivered at the Capitol before the House of Representatives on March 5th, 1884," Peyton Family papers, box 441, Mississippi University for

Women Archives.

- 4) Peyton, Annie C. "Horiatio Seymour on Higher Education," Peyton Family papers, box 441, folder 8, Mississippi University for Women Archives.
- 5) Ibid. "A State School for Girls." *The Clarion* February 18, 1884. Peyton Family papers, box 441, folder 9, Mississippi University for Women Archives.
- 6) Ibid. Speech to Mississippi Conference of the United Methodist Church, box 441, folder 9, Mississippi University for Women Archives.
- 7) Kohn, Sheldon. *The Literary and Intellectual Impact of Mississippi's Industrial Institute and College, 1884-1920* (Ph.D. diss., Georgia State University, 2007), 20.
- 8) That being said, there is a collection of oral interviews of the first African American students at the W conducted by MUW student Jaleesa Fields housed in the Billups-Garth Archives at Columbus-Lowndes County Public Library.
- 9) Various reports and memos. Charles Hogarth papers, box 265, folders 27-28, Mississippi University for Women Archives.
- 10) "MUW: A Plan for Action and Reaction." James Strobel papers, box 432, folder 4, Mississippi University for Women Archives.
- 11) e.g., Letter from James Strobel to Faculty, Staff, Students, and Friends of the University, January 17, 1986. James Strobel papers, box 432, folder 4, Mississippi University for Women Archives.
- 12) Vance, Mona K. "Fighting the Wave of Change: Cultural Transformation and Coeducation at Mississippi University for Women 1884-1982" (M.A. thesis, University of North Carolina Wilmington, 2008), 57.
- 13) Pilarski, Kenneth. Unknown title, newspaper clipping. James Strobel Papers, box 432, folder 6, Mississippi University for W