

The African American Female Elite: The Early History of African American Women in the Seven Sister Colleges, 1880-1960

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The Seven Sister colleges are well known for producing some of the nation's most successful women. At the turn of the century, they were recognized as the leading institutions for elite White women. In this article, Linda Perkins outlines the historical experiences of African American women attending the Seven Sister colleges from the institutions' founding to the civil rights era of the 1960s, a period during which approximately five hundred Black women graduated from these institutions. Through an exploration of university archives, alumni bulletins, and oral interviews with alumnae, Perkins shows that the Seven Sister colleges were not a monolithic entity: some admitted African American women as far back as the turn of the century, while others grudgingly, and only under great pressure, admitted them decades later. Perkins illustrates how the Seven Sister colleges mirrored the views of the larger society concerning race, and how issues of discrimination in admissions, housing, and financial aid in these institutions were influenced by, and had an influence on, the overall African American struggle for full participatory citizenship.

The seven private, elite northeastern women's colleges — Mount Holyoke, Vassar, Wellesley, Smith, Radcliffe, Bryn Mawr, and Barnard — commonly known as the Seven Sister colleges, are recognized for their academic excellence and distinguished alumnae. Founded in the nineteenth century in response to the leading private, elite male institutions' refusal to admit women, the Seven Sisters offered curricula of equal quality to these male institutions. Only Mount Holyoke was founded originally for the middle classes. By the turn of the century, Mount Holyoke and the other Seven Sisters became identified with the daughters of

Harvard Educational Review Vol. 67 No. 4 Winter 1997
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the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant of the middle and upper classes. The era of their founding was also one of much skepticism and hostility towards the higher learning of White women and of African American men and women, as both groups were believed to be intellectually inferior to White males. This article focuses on the history of African American women attending the Seven Sister colleges from the institutions' founding to the civil rights era of the 1960s, a period during which approximately five hundred Black¹ women graduated from these prestigious institutions. This exploration is important because these institutions are well known for producing some of the nation's professionally most successful women. The presence of African American women and their academic success in these institutions refuted the notion of Blacks' intellectual inferiority. Further, while these institutions did not explicitly prepare women for the world of work, the majority of the African American women who matriculated at the Seven Sisters did work, contributing their talents to both the Black community and the larger society.

By the 1890s, the Seven Sister colleges had evolved into institutions of academic excellence and were educating the daughters of the most wealthy and socially prominent citizens of the nation.² Although many histories and studies have been done on the Seven Sister colleges, none focuses on the presence (or absence) of African American women attending them.³ This focus is nonetheless important, because the growth of these institutions paralleled the African American struggle to obtain full citizenship, as well as educational and economic rights. Exploring the experiences of African American women in these colleges will provide insight into the extent to which these institutions mirrored the views of the larger society concerning racial issues. As many White women sought parity in education and other aspects of American life, they in turn often denied the same to African American women. Black women found themselves unwanted and frequently barred from most White women's organizations and activities.⁴ In a 1900 study conducted by African American scholar W.E.B. DuBois on Black college students, he noted that it was easier for a Black male to gain entrance into a White men's college than for a Black woman to enter a White women's college. DuBois noted that the White women's colleges were "unyielding" in their opposition to admitting African American women:⁵

Negroes have graduated from northern institutions. In most of the larger universities they are welcome and have on the whole made good records. In nearly all the western colleges they are admitted freely and have done well in some cases, and poorly in others. In one of two larger institutions, and in many of the large women's colleges [referring to the Seven Sisters], Negroes while not exactly refused admissions are strongly advised not to apply.⁶

Yet, a small number of African American women did begin to attend the Seven Sister colleges in the late nineteenth century. As will be discussed, when photographs were not required with a college application and/or the applicant was light-skinned enough to be mistaken for a White person, these institutions sometimes unknowingly admitted African Americans; in other instances, they were admitted in token numbers. When DuBois became editor of *Crisis* magazine in

1910 (the publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP]), he tracked assiduously the status and treatment of Black students in U.S. higher education. Each year, DuBois contacted the presidents of all the nation's major White colleges and universities for an update on the status of African Americans in their institutions. In 1913, *Crisis* began publishing an annual issue on Blacks and higher education. By the 1920s, members of the NAACP began speaking on White college campuses to engender support for racial integration and equality from the students. As a result of these activities, along with the NAACP's continued legal efforts to integrate public education during the 1940s and 1950s and the heightened civil rights activities of the 1960s, the Seven Sister colleges began actively recruiting Black women by the 1960s.

This article outlines the historical experiences of African American women attending the Seven Sister colleges. First, I provide a general discussion of the historical context of African American women attending these colleges in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I address how these women differed from their African American counterparts at other types of institutions, as well as from their White classmates on their respective campuses. Second, I discuss how each of the Seven Sisters responded to the presence of African American women on their respective campuses and provide a look at the campus life of these students. I also explore why some institutions opened their doors to African American women while others kept theirs firmly closed.

The discussion of race and the presence of African Americans in these institutions becomes murky at times. Many of the African American women who attended the Seven Sisters were physically indistinguishable from White women, thus it is reasonable to assume that they passed as Whites and their actual race was not recorded or known. For example, Vassar, one of the last of the Seven Sisters to officially admit African American women, had a Black woman graduate in the class of 1897. However, the student appeared to be White, and Vassar discovered only shortly before commencement that she was, in fact, partially African American — or in their eyes, Black. This discussion centers around those African American women who self-identified as such and around the Seven Sister colleges' knowingly admitting them.

The number of African American women attending all the Seven Sisters combined was rarely more than one or two per class until the 1950s, and the information available on these women is uneven. The archives of the institutions that admitted African American women in more than token numbers — Smith, Radcliffe, Wellesley, and Mount Holyoke — are rich with biographical data, enrollment information, oral histories, and lists of these students. Barnard, Vassar, and Bryn Mawr, the last of the Seven Sisters to admit Black women, did not maintain such records and have less information on these students. When appropriate, oral interviews with some of these Black women supplement the written record.

The Black Elite⁷

Studies of Black communities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries acknowledge the existence of class differences. In his 1899 study, *The Philadelphia*

Negro, DuBois noted the presence of what he defined as a small upper class of Blacks, which included caterers, government clerks, teachers, professionals, and small merchants. DuBois noted that many of these individuals had significant wealth, elite education, political influence, and connections.⁸ Another study on the Black upper class at the turn of the century noted that this group was usually college educated, attended Episcopal or Presbyterian churches, and included community leaders. This group's wealth was not as great as its White counterpart's, and status stemmed primarily from occupation, education, and family background. The Black upper class included women who attended the Seven Sister colleges, and who came primarily from families in which both parents had a formal higher education.⁹ This is not an insignificant fact, for as historian James Anderson found, until the mid-1930s, "almost all of the southern rural communities with significantly large Afro-American populations and more than half of the major southern cities failed to provide any public high schools for Black youth."¹⁰

By the late 1890s, the majority of African Americans resided in the South, where they suffered the economic, educational, legal, and social barriers of segregation. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision of 1896 established the "separate but equal" doctrine, which furthered legal restrictions on Blacks in the South, commonly known as "Jim Crow" laws. These laws suppressed any meaningful progress for African Americans in the South; even the Black middle class was subject to the same restrictions (e.g., segregated schools, public accommodations, etc.) as poorer African Americans. However, a different situation existed for those African Americans living in the North, at least those with money. DuBois observed that two classes existed among northern African Americans — "the descendants of the northern free Negroes and the free immigrants from the South."¹¹

This group of elite northern African Americans lived in a self-contained, exclusive world of restrictive clubs, with memberships based on complexion, education, and wealth. Adelaide Cromwell Hill observed in her study of upper-class Boston Blacks that this group often preferred White tutors and servants because they believed "more gentility and culture would come from exposure to Whites." She noted further that this group gave "lavish and always tasteful entertainments, including catered dinners of many courses, dances with well-known orchestras, debutante balls, select musicales and literary gatherings. They were most often Episcopal and shunned denominations associated with emotionalism or lower-class African Americans." Their daughters were often well traveled and tended to spend their summers in such spots as Martha's Vineyard, Saratoga Springs, and Newport, Rhode Island.¹²

Willard B. Gatewood writes of these upper-class African Americans in *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite 1880-1920*. He notes the central role of higher education within the African American elite, stating, "No matter how significant family background, complexion and church affiliation might be as stratifiers, they were singly and collectively less important than the disciplined, cultivated mind produced by higher education."¹³

Higher education opportunities for African American women in the nineteenth century included a growing number of Black colleges in the South, which were mostly still of high school grade.¹⁴ Even though they were called "colleges," in reality they were actually more like high schools. Outside of the South, African American women were admitted to some state universities, a few private White women's institutions, and teacher-training schools. Public sentiment during this period was often against educating African Americans of either gender on an equal basis with Whites. Thus, few White colleges admitted qualified African American women, and those institutions that did enroll them encountered hostile reactions. For example, when Prudence Crandall, a Quaker, attempted to enroll twenty-one Black girls at her Canterbury, Connecticut, Female Boarding School in 1833, local opposition to the notion that African American women should be educated similarly to White women was so great that Crandall's house was burned down, her well was poisoned, and she was ultimately driven out of town.

A 1979 study of the education of African Americans in New York State noted that, of the more than 150 academies and seminaries that existed in that state between 1840 and 1860, no more than eight admitted African Americans.¹⁵ Throughout the northern and New England states, few White institutions during the antebellum period would admit Blacks; one exception was Oberlin College in Ohio. Oberlin, an institution founded by abolitionists, began admitting African Americans and women in 1833. Many African American families relocated to Oberlin so that their children could have an opportunity to obtain a higher education. From 1833 until 1910, more than four hundred African American women attended Oberlin College.¹⁶ In sharp contrast, during the period addressed by this article — the 1890s through the 1960s — the Seven Sister colleges combined graduated approximately five hundred African American women.

By the turn of the century, the Seven Sisters were recognized as the leading institutions for elite White women. These institutions offered African American women from prominent families not only intellectual growth and stimulation, but also entrance into a world of White power and privilege. Most of the Black women who attended the Seven Sisters between the 1890s and 1960s were from these educated, solidly upper- and middle-class families. Education was expected to endow them with the refinement and culture essential for entry into the highest stratum of African American society.

Early History of Black Women in the Seven Sister Colleges

The early women's colleges were significant because they offered women a higher education degree equivalent to that of the leading men's colleges. Wellesley College in Wellesley, Massachusetts, and Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, were both founded in 1875. Radcliffe College (formerly known as the Harvard Annex) was founded in 1879. Although these three institutions are not the oldest of the Seven Sisters, they have the longest and most continuous history of Black women students and graduates. African American

women began attending Wellesley, Radcliffe, and Smith in the mid-1880s in token, yet steady, numbers. Both Mount Holyoke, founded in 1837, and Vassar, founded in 1865, also had Black women students in the late nineteenth century; however, as will be discussed later in this article, these students were not known to be African Americans until after they arrived. Neither Barnard, founded in 1889, nor Bryn Mawr, founded in 1884, admitted African Americans until well into the twentieth century. Although the number of Black women who attended these institutions prior to 1960 was small (around five hundred), their influence within the African American community was significant. They went on to serve on faculties of African American high schools and colleges, and became prominent lawyers, physicians, and scientists.

Wellesley College

Wellesley College was founded in 1875 in Wellesley, Massachusetts, by Henry Durant, a Harvard graduate and successful lawyer. Durant, a trustee of Mount Holyoke Seminar and a devout Christian, sought to model Wellesley after the religious Mount Holyoke. Religion permeated the Wellesley campus with chapels, Bible classes, and questions to students concerning their religious condition. The college statute read, "The college was founded for the glory of God and the service of the Lord Jesus Christ, in and by the education and culture of women. . . . It is required that every Trustee, Teacher, and Officer, shall be a member of an Evangelical Church." According to Horowitz, Durant enforced these statutes literally.¹⁷

The first African American to graduate from Wellesley College was Harriett Alleyne Rice of Newport, Rhode Island. Rice, the daughter of a steward on the steamship "The Pilgrim," lived on campus in a single room, according to the campus directory.¹⁸ After graduating in 1887, Rice earned a medical degree in 1893 from the Women's Medical School of the New York Infirmary. From all indications, Rice's experience at Wellesley was positive. She kept in touch with the college and returned there in 1920 to lecture on her experiences as a medical assistant in France during the First World War. Rice's services had been refused by the American Red Cross because of her race, and she worked instead for the French government.¹⁹ In response to a 1937 alumnae questionnaire that asked, "Have you any handicap, physical or other, which has been a determining factor in your [professional] activity?" Rice replied, "Yes! I am colored which is worse than any crime in this God *blessed Christian* country! My country (100%) tis of *thee!*"²⁰

While it appears that the African American women who attended Wellesley in the first two decades of the twentieth century did not articulate publicly any instances of discrimination at the institution, Jane Bolin, class of 1928, did. Bolin was from New York City and the daughter of a prominent lawyer who had attended Williams College, an elite men's college in western Massachusetts. She recalled that she and Ruth Brown, the only other Black woman admitted as a first-year student in 1924, were assigned to the same room in an apartment in which they were the only college students. Bolin notes a number of incidents

that revolved around her race. For example, although African American women were allowed to eat in the dining hall, Southern students refused to sit with them; Bolin's roommate was asked to play the role of Aunt Jemima in a skit (including wearing a bandanna); and, although Bolin was an honors student, she was rejected from one of the sororities that claimed to be concerned with social problems. Her rejection letter was an unsigned note left under her door.

Bolin's "sharpest and ugliest" memory of Wellesley occurred during a mandatory conference with a guidance counselor in her senior year. Bolin wrote that the counselor was in shock when she heard that Bolin wanted to be an attorney. Bolin recalled, "She threw up her hands in disbelief and told me there was little opportunity in law for a woman and absolutely none for a 'colored' one. Surely I should consider teaching."²¹ Despite this discouragement, Bolin had a distinguished career in law: after Wellesley she attended Yale Law School, earned an LL.B. in 1931, and in 1939, at the age of 31, was appointed the first Black woman judge in the United States by New York City Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia. Bolin recalled bitterly that, although her historic appointment was widely publicized and she received letters and telegrams from all over the world, "not a single note from teacher, president, dean, house mother" or anyone in an official capacity at Wellesley during her four years there acknowledged her achievement.²²

However, from the perspective of a White southerner in the 1920s, Wellesley was extremely accommodating to African Americans. Virginia Foster Durr, Wellesley class of 1925, grew up in a prominent Birmingham, Alabama, family. A quintessential southern belle, Foster said that her family wanted her to be well married and that Wellesley was an investment in achieving that goal. After arriving at Wellesley in 1921, Foster met a southern woman in Cambridge whose Southern Club sponsored parties and dances for southerners. As a freshman she lived off campus in Wellesley village, as was customary; after her first year, she was able to live on campus. Of her first night in the dormitory, she wrote:

I went to the dining room and a Negro girl was sitting at my table. My God, I nearly fell over dead. I couldn't believe it. I just absolutely couldn't believe it. She wasn't very black, sort of pale, but she was sitting there eating at the table with me in college. I promptly got up, marched out of the room, went upstairs, and waited for the head of the house to come. She was a tall, thin, New England spinster. She wore glasses on her nose and she would cast her head down and look over them at us. I told her that I couldn't possibly eat at the table with a Negro girl. I was from Alabama and my father would have a fit. He came from Union Springs, Bullock County, and the idea of my eating with a Negro girl — well, he would die. I couldn't do it. She would have to move me immediately.²³

According to Foster, the house mother informed her that Wellesley had rules, and that students had to eat at the table to which they had been assigned for a month, after which Foster could move. If she did not want to comply, she was told, she could withdraw from the college without penalty on her academic record. Foster said that when she presented her dilemma to her southern girlfriend, her friend convinced her of what was at stake. Foster was enjoying her college years: "I was having the time of my life at Wellesley. I was in love with a

Harvard law student, the first captain of VMI, and life was just a bed of roses. But I had been taught that if I ate at the table of a Negro girl I would be committing a terrible sin against society.²⁴ Ultimately, Foster decided to stay and simply not mention to her father that she had to eat at the same table with a Black woman:

So I didn't tell Daddy and I stayed. But that was the first time I became aware that my attitude was considered foolish by some people and that Wellesley College wasn't going to stand for it. That experience had a tremendous effect on me. . . . There were other Southern girls at Wellesley. We were all a little ashamed of breaking the Southern taboos, and yet we didn't want to leave. I didn't know whether I had acted rightly or wrongly, whether I should have stood by Southern tradition and gone home or not. I only knew I had stayed because I didn't want to miss the good times I was having.²⁵

Segregated housing remained an issue at Wellesley into the 1930s. The faculty in the Department of Biblical History addressed the problem in a letter to President Ellen F. Pendleton, protesting the college's policy of housing discrimination:

We wish cordially to express our recognition of the courtesy and kindness which the college administration has always shown to underprivileged groups at Wellesley, and our realization of the expenditure of time and effort in their behalf; but we feel that we must state our deep regret that the administration has felt it necessary to adopt a new policy — the definite ruling that students of different race [sic] may not room together.

Such a regulation made by the dominant group must inevitably be interpreted as an endorsement of race prejudice. Such an endorsement seems to us inconsistent with Wellesley's heritage, and with the teaching of Jesus as that teaching has been interpreted at Wellesley.

We therefore sincerely hope that the college will find it possible to modify its recent formulation of policy.²⁶

There is no other correspondence concerning either the letter or the policy. College records make no further mention of segregated housing until 1948, when Dean of Residence Ruth H. Lindsay telegraphed a southern woman named Mary Chase to inform her: "It would be entirely contrary to the policy of the College to assign a white freshman and a negro freshman to [the] same room. Any rumor of such assignment is without slightest foundation."²⁷

Three Black women attended Wellesley in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Two of them earned baccalaureate degrees, one in 1887 and the other in 1888.²⁸ Only one other Black woman earned a degree from the school over the next twenty-five years. Portia Washington, daughter of prominent educator Booker T. Washington, attended for only one year. By 1960, seventy-five Black women had attended Wellesley; forty-five earned baccalaureate degrees, others were in graduate programs, and some attended without earning a degree.

Wellesley's first two Black alumnae were happy with their college experience. As noted above, Harriet Rice, Wellesley's first Black graduate, kept in touch with her alma mater. Ella Elbert Smith, who earned her degree in 1888, when asked

in an alumni questionnaire about the weaknesses and strengths of Wellesley, wrote, "I think that one of Wellesley's finest characteristics now and from the beginning is that it makes no distinction as to race, color or creed."²⁹ When asked in 1952 to reflect on the most important aspect of her college experience, Smith noted, "personal contact and often fine and lasting friendships with members of the faculty. These were possible and priceless in the Wellesley of my day."³⁰ Upon Smith's death in 1955, her family requested that donations in her memory be sent to Wellesley College. In addition, Smith donated more than 1,300 books, pamphlets, and rare manuscripts related to slavery and the Civil War to Wellesley College.³¹ As will be discussed later, most African Americans considered Wellesley, along with Smith College, to be the most welcoming of the Seven Sister colleges. The administration stood behind them when issues of racism arose, as was evidenced by Virginia Foster Durr's recollection. Although its housing was segregated in 1913, Wellesley was the only Seven Sister college that allowed Blacks to live on campus.

Radcliffe College

Originally known as the Harvard Annex, Radcliffe College was founded in 1879 in Cambridge, Massachusetts, by the Society for the Collegiate Instruction of Women. Women had to meet the same admission requirements as for Harvard. Radcliffe students were taught by Harvard faculty, and were awarded degrees and honors according to the same standards as Harvard.³²

Radcliffe enrolled African American women continuously from the 1890s. Though barred from campus housing, they participated in all other aspects of campus life and extracurricular activities. The first Black Radcliffe graduate was Alberta Scott of Cambridge. Scott graduated from Cambridge Latin High School and entered Radcliffe in 1894. There, Scott was active in the Idler, a dramatics club, and in the German Club. She was also involved in music. After graduating in 1898, Scott went to Tuskegee Institute at the invitation of Booker T. Washington. She taught there until she became ill and had to return to Cambridge in 1900. She died in 1903 at the age of twenty-seven.³³

Most of Radcliffe's earliest Black students were from Cambridge and the greater Boston area. Because African Americans could not live on campus, students from farther away had to find accommodations with members of Cambridge's Black community. As I describe later, the issue of discrimination in campus housing was revisited over and over by African American students, as well as by the NAACP. In 1913, Mary Gibson became the first African American from outside the Cambridge/Boston area to enroll in Radcliffe and was also the first student from a Black high school, Dunbar High School in Washington, DC. Her enrollment presented the first major racial problem for Radcliffe officials. Although Gibson was a brilliant student and had outstanding credentials, she needed financial aid. Her parents were both college educated. Her father had been a lawyer and her mother had taught at Tuskegee Institute, but her father's recent death had left them without financial resources.³⁴ Gibson's mother was eager for her daughter to receive a first-rate education, and they moved to Cam-

bridge together to set up an apartment for Mary. Gibson had a recommendation from Roscoe Bruce, a prominent African American Harvard graduate. Bruce was assistant superintendent of the Washington, DC, Public Schools and a friend of Radcliffe President Lebaron Russell Briggs. Apparently the Gibsons felt confident that their connections through Bruce would give Mary an excellent chance for a scholarship, but this was not the case. Briggs told them that very few scholarships were awarded to first-year students.³⁵ Instead, Radcliffe Dean Bertha Boody found Mary a job doing domestic work. Her mother was outraged. She refused to allow her daughter to accept the position, saying the job offer was racist and insisting that Radcliffe could find scholarship monies or a job more suitable and less demeaning, such as working in the library.

President Briggs frantically attempted to raise money for Mary from outside supporters of Radcliffe. In the meantime, Mrs. Gibson refused to allow Mary to work and her tuition was not paid. The college hurriedly obtained a loan for Gibson. While Briggs worked intensely on Mary's behalf, Mary and her mother believed that her biggest obstacle at Radcliffe was Dean Boody. They believed Boody, a southerner, was racially prejudiced and under no circumstances wanted Gibson to be awarded a Radcliffe scholarship. Boody's influence was considerable, and she convinced Briggs that the Gibsons were ingrates and basically uppity Negroes.³⁶

The Gibsons were from Washington, DC, where many prominent Black families had children attending Seven Sister and Ivy League colleges. Briggs was concerned about their interpretation of this problem, especially since Radcliffe had always been perceived as a liberal, welcoming institution to African American women. Mary Church Terrell was a prominent African American club-woman, civil rights leader, and former educator (she had taught at Dunbar High School). In a letter to Terrell, who had spoken at Radcliffe in 1912 on "The Progress of the Colored Women," Briggs apologetically explained the situation from his perspective:

If you don't mind my saying so, there is, I suspect, a little difficulty in regards to Miss Gibson, a difficulty which probably comes from the fact that her mother has been a teacher and feels, naturally enough, a certain superiority in herself and in her daughter which makes her shrink from letting her daughter do certain kinds of honorable service. We have girls who have been with us a year or two, whom everyone respects who go as mothers' helpers or serve in any capacity whereby they may honorably help themselves along. . . . I suppose the fact that her daughter is a colored girl makes her the more cautious, so that she is unwilling that her daughter should do many things which the most earnest of our white girls do not hesitate for a moment to do and which everybody respects a self-respecting girl for doing.³⁷

Mrs. Gibson secured employment in Boston and Mary found a part-time job selling magazine subscriptions, so they were able to support themselves during Mary's first year at Radcliffe. When Mary was refused a scholarship the second year, Mrs. Gibson went to prominent clergy in the Cambridge and Boston White communities to garner their support. Briggs admitted in a letter to one of the clergymen, the Reverend Dr. van Allen, that Radcliffe had not awarded Gibson

a scholarship her second year because they did not want her to return to Radcliffe. However, he said that the question of the moment was "whether she will be saved by being forced out or by being kept here with uninterrupted college education, after which she can take care of herself and her mother too." Briggs ended his letter saying that Mary was an excellent student.³⁸

Briggs always appeared torn about Radcliffe's treatment of Gibson, and his conscience ultimately haunted him. Within a month of his letter to van Allen, Briggs wrote in a confidential letter that he believed Radcliffe had been unjust in not awarding Mary a scholarship. He said that in spite of her financial difficulties and in the face of starvation and destitution, Mary had remained an outstanding student. He wrote: "The persistency with which she has done good work — even, as I have learned, at a time when she had insufficient food, is a mark of something which I believe should be encouraged."³⁹ He said that every visible avenue of help to Mary had been deliberately stopped. But, he now agreed, given Mary's academic record, it was reasonable for her to expect a scholarship. In fact, the person with whom she had tied for a scholarship in her second year came from a home of comfortable financial circumstances. With a change of heart and reason, Briggs said that he believed that Radcliffe's actions toward Mary were "harsh and unnatural," considering that the girl had no home or resources.⁴⁰ Dean Boody vehemently disagreed and said she would be "ashamed" if Radcliffe awarded anything to Gibson.⁴¹ Boody's decision prevailed, but Briggs was able to secure a personal, interest-free loan from an anonymous donor for the remainder of Mary's stay at Radcliffe. After she graduated in 1918, she repaid the loan in full.⁴²

Despite Mary's financial woes, she led an active, full life at Radcliffe. She was a member of the student government, the Science Club, and the Cosmopolitan Club; she was also class accompanist and wrote the Class Song for 1918. After graduating, she returned to Washington, DC, and taught at her alma mater,

Dunbar High School, and sent many of her students to Radcliffe during the course of her years there. At her fiftieth Radcliffe reunion in 1968, Mary recalled with pleasure her years at Radcliffe, but stated, "the fly in the ointment was the dean from Baltimore, who demanded that I work as a domestic if I ever hoped to get her recommendation for a scholarship. In spite of her persistent persecution, I found consolation in the president, an ideal Yankee whom I adored."⁴³ Mary Gibson remained a loyal and devoted Radcliffe alumna throughout her life.

Black students had varying opinions about the discrimination they experienced. Margaret Perea McCane, who graduated from Radcliffe in 1927, recalled years later that

it was fortunate that all of us lived at home, because in those days Black students could not live in the dormitories at Harvard or Radcliffe. It wasn't until my junior year in college that a Black girl was admitted to the dormitory at Radcliffe and it was a few years later that black boys at Harvard could live at college. But, McCane rationalized, those were some of the things that one took in one's stride then. I do not say that it was fair and that we should have been able to accept it. It was a

situation [in] which one dealt with the problems that one had, with the handicaps that one met, and one did not let those things stand in the way of one's getting an education, a good education for that was why you were there. And you recognized the fact that your contacts and what you did and the record you made were going to influence other young black people who followed you. I think that always stood as a goal before all of us.⁴⁴

Radcliffe's African American graduates contributed greatly to the education of their race at both historically Black colleges and Black public high schools. Beginning with the first, Alberta Scott, who taught at Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, all but one of Radcliffe's Black graduates during the first decades of the twentieth century taught at some point at Black education institutions.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, Radcliffe graduated more than one Black woman each year. By 1920, four Black women graduated in the same class. This was unheard of at the other Seven Sister colleges, where such numbers would not be achieved until the 1940s and 1950s. By 1950, Radcliffe had graduated fifty-six African American undergraduates and thirty-seven African American graduate students. It was by far the leader in the number of Black women graduates among the Seven Sister colleges.

Smith College

Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, was endowed by a wealthy single woman, Sophia Smith, in 1868. A devoutly religious woman, Smith sought to establish a college at which women could have an education equal to that offered by the leading men's colleges, but also wanted the college to be "pervaded by the spirit of evangelical Christian religion."⁴⁵ Thus, like its sister institutions of Mount Holyoke and Wellesley, religion was central to the life of Smith College.

The first African American woman to graduate from Smith was Otelia Cromwell of Washington, DC, who graduated in 1900. Her father, John Wesley Cromwell, was a prominent educator and, after earning a law degree, a chief examiner in the U.S. Post Office. Otelia Cromwell was a product of the segregated schools of Washington. She transferred to Smith College in 1898 from the all-Black Miner's Teachers College. As was the case at most White institutions, Cromwell was not allowed to live on campus and was housed in the home of a Smith College professor. Despite this, she apparently enjoyed her education; in a letter to her father in 1899, Cromwell expressed her happiness with Smith and her pleasure with classes and professors. She wrote, "I am having a very happy time of it this year." After graduating from Smith, Cromwell studied in Germany, earned a masters degree from Columbia University in 1910, and a Ph.D. in English from Yale University in 1926. She spent her life as an educator of Black youth in Washington, DC.

In 1913, Smith faced a situation that forced it to reconsider its discriminatory housing policy. The situation came to a head when Carrie Lee, the daughter of a letter carrier from New Bedford, Massachusetts, was admitted to Smith. Because photographs were not required for admission at the time, and because Lee was from a predominantly White high school, Smith officials were unaware

of her race until she arrived on campus. Her race became an immediate problem because she had been assigned a room with a White student from Tennessee. When the White roommate protested, Smith told Lee to find accommodation within the approved housing of the Northampton community. The only approved housing available to Lee required that she be a servant and not use the main entrance of the house.

Insulted and outraged, Lee's parents contacted the NAACP. Minutes from an NAACP board meeting note that Dr. Joel E. Spingarn, one of the organization's founders who served as chairman, treasurer, and president, met with Smith's president to discuss the matter. He told the school's dean that he would "unloose the dogs of war at Smith" if the situation was not resolved favorably.⁴⁶ In the face of such negative publicity, the college found housing for Lee in the home of a Smith professor, Julia Caverno, who had housed other African Americans. Although *Crisis* magazine did not name Smith College as the culprit, W.E.B. DuBois did cover the story. He reported that a "refined young girl of cultured parents who had won a scholarship in one of the large colleges" had been denied housing. He wrote that after the White student from Nashville complained,

the colored girl was asked to leave and was unable to secure a room on the campus or anywhere in the college town. One of the teachers, a staunch friend, took her in but was unable to solve more than the room problem. Then began the wary search for board which was finally only secured on condition that the young lady would act as waitress. Though she had never done work of this kind she pluckily determined to stay on the ground and fight out her battle. Meantime, the Association was working hard to reach the proper authorities. Fortunately, a friend of the colored people on the board of trustees of the college became interested and succeeded in getting the girl on the campus in a delightful room where she is entitled to all the privileges of the college, including, of course, the dining room. Best of all, she is becoming popular with her classmates and through her charming personality is winning friends for her race.⁴⁷

Members of the NAACP board played a prominent role in changing Smith's housing policy. Moorfield Storey, a successful Boston lawyer and chairman of the NAACP board of trustees, wrote Smith's president, the Reverend Marion Burton, that if the story about Lee's housing dilemma was true, "I think it is the very greatest discredit to Smith College." Storey continued:

For a Massachusetts College to so far forget the principles which have made Massachusetts what it is, and to weakly abandon the rights of colored people in order to conciliate Southern prejudice is to the last degree weak and discreditable. I sincerely hope that this statement I have received is not true, or that if it is true the policy will be abandoned. Otherwise I hope the facts will be published throughout the breadth and length of this state in order that the citizens of Massachusetts may understand how little regard the trustees of Smith College have for the principles of justice.⁴⁸

Ruth Baldwin, an NAACP board member, Smith alumna, and the first woman to serve as a regular member on the Smith board of trustees, used her influence to have Smith's housing policy changed.⁴⁹ Baldwin discovered that Smith had

no official policy about Blacks living on campus, but that this discriminatory practice was based on the individual decisions of college officials. Baldwin felt that the fact that Wellesley College allowed African American women to live on campus would influence Smith trustees who were sympathetic to the issue. The matter was resolved in October 1913, when the trustees affirmed the rights of African American women to live in Smith housing.⁵⁰

The NAACP's influence at Smith widened with the appointment of William Allan Neilson as the college's third president in 1917. Neilson was a member of the national board of the NAACP. Walter White, a general secretary of the NAACP, recalled that Neilson "devoted a great portion of his extracurricular activity to service as a member of the board of directors of the NAACP."⁵¹ White wrote:

Thanks to Dr. Neilson and others on the Smith faculty, the college maintained leadership among American educational institutions in ignoring artificial lines of demarcation based on race, social position, wealth, or place of birth. Few colleges I have known have been more free from cant and hypocrisy or more ready to examine new ideas than Smith.⁵²

He stated it was because of Neilson's and Smith's leadership that he and his wife decided to have their daughter Jane educated there.

The Lee incident led Smith officials to inquire about housing policies at the other Seven Sisters. Wellesley was the only institution that claimed not to discriminate in admissions or housing against African Americans. Mount Holyoke, which had graduated two African Americans in the late nineteenth century, did not admit Black women in 1913, nor did Barnard, Bryn Mawr, and Vassar admit African Americans that year.

After Otelia Cromwell, Smith consistently admitted African American women, usually one per year. It was not until 1925 that two Black women graduated in the same class. This was repeated in 1926, and then not again until 1934.⁵³ By 1964, sixty-nine Black women (including African women) had attended and/or graduated from Smith.

Mount Holyoke College

Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley, Massachusetts, is the oldest of the Seven Sisters. It was founded as a women's seminary in 1837 by Mary Lyon. Its mission was to train teachers, missionaries, and wives of missionaries, and did not achieve collegiate status until the 1890s.

In 1845, the Mount Holyoke trustees voted not to admit Black women. After the vote, Mary Lyon received a long letter from a White male resident of nearby Springfield. He protested the college's policy, which he believed was hypocritical, considering the Christian principles espoused by the school. He wrote that public sentiment was undergoing a rapid change, and that the events that occurred at Prudence Crandall's Canterbury Female Boarding School would not be repeated. He noted that Dartmouth College had recently decided to admit colored students, and concluded by stating, "I hope that the religious influence

that goes out of the Mount Holyoke Seminary will no longer be contaminated with this hatred or that it will not *deliberately* decide to reject colored applicants.⁵⁴ Another letter to Lyon, from a former student, urged her to take a stand on the question of slavery, pointing out that while Mount Holyoke expressed interest in foreign missions, Black slaves in this country were ignored.⁵⁵ Lyon, who died in 1849, never took a public stand on slavery.

Mount Holyoke's earliest known African American graduate during its seminary years was Hortense Parker of Ripley, Ohio, in the class of 1883. The first Black to obtain a collegiate degree from Mount Holyoke was Martha Ralston of Worcester, Massachusetts, in the class of 1898. According to a letter from the dean of Mount Holyoke in 1913 to Ada Comstock, dean of Smith College, the race of both Ralston and Parker was a surprise to the officials of the college when they first arrived.⁵⁶ All students were required to live on campus at Mount Holyoke, and though records are missing for the years of Parker's matriculation, subsequent records indicate that African American students who were enrolled in the early years lived in single rooms in the Seminary Building.

Alumnae records state that Ralston's father was an Englishman and that her home "is located in one of the wealthiest sections of Worcester."⁵⁷ A musician whose education was financed by a patron, Ralston had planned to study in Europe, but the death of her patron in her senior year prevented her from being able to go abroad.⁵⁸ Ralston apparently made friends at Mount Holyoke. One of her White classmates wrote to her mother upon Ralston's arrival in 1894, "There is a colored girl here in the freshman class. She comes from Worcester, Mass. and the other girls who come from that place like her very much and say that she is of a very good family."⁵⁹

Mount Holyoke's first African American graduate of the twentieth century was Francis Williams of St. Louis, Missouri. Until her death in 1992, Williams was the school's oldest living Black alumna. Like Otelia Cromwell, the first Black graduate of Smith College, Williams was a product of a Black segregated high school in the South. Her parents were college graduates, as were her three siblings. Her father was principal of the well-known Charles Sumner High School, a Black public school in St. Louis. After graduating as valedictorian from Sumner, Williams attended the University of Cincinnati for one year. She found the campus too large and impersonal, and decided to transfer. Her mother sent Williams's transcript to Mount Holyoke in 1916, and only after she had been accepted did her mother inform the college that Williams was African American. She received a letter from the college stating that they did not believe her daughter would be happy at Mount Holyoke, to which she responded that she wasn't sending her daughter to be happy, but to receive an education. Williams, who had a light complexion, recalled that many of her fellow students would not sit with her at meals, although some were not concerned about her race. Williams held a double major in chemistry and economics, and graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1919. Her parents paid for her education at Mount Holyoke, but she received a fellowship from the college after graduation to attend the New York School of Social Work. After earning a certificate there, she earned a masters in political

science from the University of Chicago. Williams spent her professional career working in the area of race relations for the National Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and various other civil rights organizations.⁶⁰

More than the other Seven Sister colleges, Mount Holyoke attracted African American women from Black high schools and the South, including several from Atlanta, Georgia. There was one Black graduate in the Mount Holyoke class of 1926 from Wilmington, Delaware; the next five Black students at the school were from Atlanta and Washington, DC. Of this group, two were graduates of the prestigious all-Black Dunbar High School in Washington, which had a long history of sending its graduates to elite New England colleges. The other three were transfer students, two from Spelman College in Atlanta, and one from Atlanta University (an affiliate of Spelman).⁶¹ The Atlanta connection was due to a prominent White alumna of the class of 1909, Florence Read. In 1927 Read was appointed president of the all-Black Spelman College, a women's college founded in 1881 and modeled in part after Mount Holyoke.⁶²

Few African American women graduated from Mount Holyoke prior to the mid-1960s; by 1964, only thirty-nine had graduated since Hortense Parker in 1883. One African American graduated from Mount Holyoke during the twenties, six in the thirties, twelve during the forties (due to increased pressure from religious and civil rights groups), twelve during the fifties, and five from 1960 to 1964.⁶³

Despite their small numbers, the African American women at Mount Holyoke participated fully in campus organizations and events. The institution and its environment nurtured the women intellectually and spiritually. The Black women who attended Mount Holyoke before the 1960s all said that they would attend the institution again.

Bryn Mawr College

Bryn Mawr College in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, was founded in 1885 by Orthodox Quakers "for the advanced education and care of young women, or girls of the higher classes of society."⁶⁴ Bryn Mawr's mission, as interpreted by the institution's president, the formidable M. Carey Thomas, who reigned from 1893 to 1922, excluded Black women. Although Thomas explained the absence of Black students as being due to the "difficulty of the admissions examination and the fact that we do not admit on certificate of high school graduation," in reality it was her deeply held belief in the inferiority of African Americans that kept them out. Her bigotry, according to Thomas's biographer Helen Horowitz, was rooted in her Baltimore upbringing in which her only interactions with Blacks were with servants.⁶⁵

In 1903, Jessie Fauset, an African American from Philadelphia, graduated at the top of her class at the city's Girls' High. It was customary that the school's top student would enter Bryn Mawr on scholarship, but when it was discovered that Fauset was Black, President Thomas raised money for Fauset to attend Cornell (Thomas's alma mater) rather than have a Black woman attend Bryn Mawr. In 1906, Thomas received an inquiry from M Street High School in Washington,

DC, an important source of talented African American students to elite private colleges in the North, concerning the suitability of Bryn Mawr for its students. Thomas responded that their students should seek admissions to other New England colleges rather than Bryn Mawr, due to the large number of students those schools admitted from the middle and southern states. She reasoned:

As I believe that a great part of the benefit of a college education is derived from intimate association with other students of the same age interested in the same intellectual pursuits, I should be inclined to advise such a student to seek admission to a college situated in one of the New England states where she would not be so apt to be deprived of this intellectual companionship because of the different composition of the student body.⁶⁶

While Thomas implied that Bryn Mawr students would not feel comfortable with African American classmates, these sentiments actually reflected Thomas's own inhibitions.

In her opening address of the 1916 school year to the Bryn Mawr student body, Thomas expressed her belief in the intellectual superiority of the Anglo-Saxon race:

If the present intellectual supremacy of the White races is maintained, as I hope that it will be for centuries to come, I believe it will be because they are the only races that have seriously begun to educate their women. . . . One thing we know beyond doubt and that is that certain races have never yet in the history of the world manifested any continuous mental activity nor any continuous power of government. Such are the pure negroes of Africa, the Indians, the Esquimaux, the South Sea Islanders, the Turks, etc. . . . These facts must be faced by a country like the United States which is fast becoming, if it has not already become, the melting pot of nations into which are cast at the rate of a million a year the backward people of Europe like the Czechs, the Slavs, and the south Italians. If the laws of heredity mean anything whatsoever, we are jeopardizing the intellectual heritage of the American people by this headlong intermixture of races. . . . If we tarnish our inheritance of racial power at the source, our nation will never again be the same. . . . Our early American stock is still very influential but this cannot continue indefinitely. For example, each year I ask each freshman class to tell me what countries their parents originally came from and for how many generations back their families have been on American soil. It is clear to me that almost all of our student body are early time Americans, that their ancestors have been here for generations, and that they are overwhelmingly English, Scotch, Irish, Welsh, and that of other admixtures, French, German, Dutch largely predominate. All other strains are negligible. Our Bryn Mawr college students therefore as a whole seem to belong by heredity to the dominant races. You, then, students of Bryn Mawr, have the best intellectual inheritance the world affords.⁶⁷

Not surprisingly, given Thomas's views, no African American women attended Bryn Mawr while she was president, regardless of their qualifications.

Although Thomas retired as president of Bryn Mawr in 1922, she remained a director and member of the board of trustees for life. Thomas's successor was Marion Edwards Park, a former dean of Radcliffe College. Soon after Thomas's

retirement, an African American student from New England enrolled at Bryn Mawr, but she left after one week. Her identity and circumstances, even the year she came, remain a mystery. College records indicate that this woman requested that her name never appear on any list concerning Bryn Mawr.⁶⁸

In 1927, the Bryn Mawr board of directors voted to authorize President Park to reply to inquiries regarding the admission of African American women, but with the proviso that she make it clear that such students would be admitted "only as non-residential students." Board member Thomas's opposition to the admission of Black students was steadfast, but the college nevertheless moved forward in this regard.

Enid Cook entered Bryn Mawr in 1927. She majored in chemistry and biology, and in 1931 became the first African American woman to graduate from the college. Cook lived in the home of a Bryn Mawr professor her freshman year, and then with a Black family in the town during her remaining years. She earned a Ph.D. in bacteriology from the University of Chicago in 1937. The second Black woman to graduate from Bryn Mawr was Lillian Russell, in 1934. Russell, who was from Boston, was discouraged from attending Bryn Mawr by the Boston alumnae chapter. They did not believe it was a good place for a "coloured girl" and they felt she would not be happy. But Russell insisted that she wanted to attend, and was awarded the New England Regional scholarship. The Boston alumnae chapter was unable to have the housing restriction waived; thus Russell lived her first few weeks at the college with President Park, and subsequently with Black families in the area. She majored in chemistry and philosophy and was active in extracurricular activities. After graduating from Bryn Mawr, Russell did graduate study in physical chemistry at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

As mentioned earlier, M. Carey Thomas, while no longer president of Bryn Mawr after 1922, remained a trustee. Her biographer Helen Horowitz noted that after 1922, Thomas "kept her hand in Bryn Mawr," even to the point of interference.⁶⁹ In 1930, in the midst of Bryn Mawr's discussion of housing restrictions, Thomas wrote to Virginia Gildersleeves, dean of Barnard College, asking what Barnard's policy was on this matter.⁷⁰ Thomas confided to Gildersleeves her concern that, since Philadelphia had become a center for African Americans, she anticipated continued inquiries concerning admissions and housing from that community. Thomas expressed her concern about the presence of African American men if African American women were allowed to live on campus. She said that when four Black women were allowed to live on Bryn Mawr's campus during summer school, "whenever entertainments are given by the summer school a solid block of negro men from the neighborhood of Bryn Mawr appears in the audience, last summer I am told from twenty-five to thirty."⁷¹ Gildersleeves responded that no African American woman had ever lived on campus at Barnard, but that they were allowed to live in graduate housing at Columbia.⁷²

The debate on the admission of African American women and their right to be housed on campus clearly revealed that President Park, former dean at Radcliffe, was quite different from M. Carey Thomas. When a Bryn Mawr alumna

wrote to the school's *Alumnae Bulletin* voicing her opposition to African American women living on campus, President Park responded:

I agree with all the premises of your letter and arrive at the opposite conclusion as to Bryn Mawr's responsibility, but officially I shall not bring up the matter of the residence of negro students this year. There is much difference of opinion, I think, in all groups connected with the college . . . but I shall be unwilling to propose that a negro student should come into residence while there is strong undergraduate feeling against it, even although the feeling, as I believe it is, is actually on the part of a minority.⁷³

Although a couple of Black women graduate students lived in the residence halls in the 1930s and early 1940s, the housing issue was not resolved until 1942, when the executive committee of the board of directors ended the restriction that Blacks could not live on campus. The board voted that "hereafter all students be admitted [and housed] according to the rules and regulations in force as adopted by the Faculty from time to time."⁷⁴ The first Black woman moved into unrestricted campus housing in 1946.

Even after African Americans were allowed to attend Bryn Mawr, beginning in 1927, few did. Considering the school's long history of discriminatory practices and attitudes towards African Americans, it took a courageous Black woman to seek admission to Bryn Mawr. By 1960, only nine African American women had graduated from the institution: two in the 1930s, one in 1948, one in each of the years from 1954 to 1960, except for 1956.

In a 1979 oral history, Evelyn Jones Rich, the African American graduate of the class of 1954, said that she felt she was graded harshly at Bryn Mawr and the marks she received did not fairly represent her work.⁷⁵ Rich, who later earned a Ph.D. from Columbia, believed that unjust grades prevented her from graduating cum laude. However, she also recalled that in her senior year, when she and a Black male friend were refused service at a restaurant in the town of Bryn Mawr, the Undergraduate Association, other students, and the college president pressured the restaurant to change its discriminatory policy. When the college lawyer found that the policy violated a Pennsylvania law, the restaurant owner stopped barring African Americans from eating at a booth.⁷⁶

The 1958 Black Bryn Mawr graduate, Camilla Jones Tatem, became a doctor, but said she felt this was in spite of, and not because of, Bryn Mawr. She said she never felt a part of the biology department where she majored, and that the department members discouraged her academic pursuits.⁷⁷ In contrast, Christine Philpot Clark, a Black graduate of the class of 1960 who later earned a law degree at Yale, recalled that she liked Bryn Mawr and "even loved particular faculty." She said her Bryn Mawr years coincided with the Little Rock, Arkansas, push to integrate its Central High School, and that this created enormous guilt feelings in some of her White classmates.⁷⁸ She noted that two of the four Black women attending Bryn Mawr at that time (one per class) were elected class presidents. "I was approached by some classmates trying to enlist me to be the third," she recalled, "but I knew then the distorted motivations behind it all. I remember, too, the hate letters the two black presidents were receiving."⁷⁹

Clearly, by the 1950s, when a few African American women began to attend Bryn Mawr, the other Seven Sister colleges offered more favorable options. Bryn Mawr and Vassar were the last of the Seven Sisters to admit African American women. For those few African American women who were the early graduates of these institutions, their greatest reward was the power of the degree to advance their career objectives and to demonstrate to the world their ability to compete with the majority members of society.

Vassar College

Vassar College was founded in Poughkeepsie, New York, in 1865, with the endowment of a wealthy brewer, Matthew Vassar. This was a significant event for women's higher education, as Vassar was established as a full-fledged liberal arts college from its inception. Vassar's academic reputation and its affluent alumnae probably account for its being the most resistant to the admission of African American students.⁸⁰ It was the last of the Seven Sister colleges to knowingly admit African American students.

The first known Black student at Vassar was Anita Florence Hemmings, from Boston. She enrolled in 1893 and graduated in 1897. A scandal erupted throughout New England when it was discovered that Hemmings, who was light-skinned and passed for White, was actually African American. The event drew significant press coverage. One headline read: "Negro Girl at Vassar: the handsomest girl there. Yale and Harvard Men among those who sought favor with the 'brunette beauty'"⁸¹ Another article reported that "Vassar girls are agitated over the report that one of the students in the senior class of '97 is of Negro parentage. She did not disclose the fact until just before graduation when statements made to Hemmings' roommate led to an investigation."⁸² The article said that Hemmings had been noticed as being very bright as a young child, and that her early education was financed by a wealthy White woman. Hemmings studied hard, passed the required examination, and entered Vassar. The article noted that "Vassar is noted for its exclusiveness, and every official of the college refuses to say aught regarding this girl graduate."⁸³ Another source reported that the faculty was debating whether Hemmings should be denied her diploma. "Never had a colored girl been a student at aristocratic Vassar, and professors were at a loss to foresee the effect upon the future if this one were allowed to be graduated."⁸⁴ In the end the faculty did consent to her graduation, reasoning that she was but a few days from commencement and, after this event, the girl would be gone and forgotten.

While at Vassar, Hemmings was active in the Debate Society, College Glee Club, and the Contemporary Club Literary Organization. After graduating she worked at the Boston Public Library in the foreign cataloguing division. She married a physician, and her daughter, Ellen Parker Love, graduated from Vassar in the class of 1927.⁸⁵ Presumably Love passed for White as well, since her application stated that she was English and French. Hemmings's husband's race was unknown.⁸⁶

Vassar officials clearly felt that the presence of African American women, even those with a slight tinge of Black blood, would detract from the image it sought

to project as an institution for the aristocratic and genteel woman. Historian Lynn Gordon points out that during this period, students from Vassar came almost exclusively from upper-middle-class families. By 1905, attendance at Vassar had become a tradition in many families and a Granddaughters Club was started for students whose mothers and aunts had attended the school.⁸⁷

Continuing his pressure on White institutions, W.E.B. DuBois wrote Henry MacCracken, president of Vassar in 1930, to inquire into Vassar's policy on admitting African Americans. The letter read, "For many years the *Crisis* magazine has secured annually information concerning colored students in northern institutions. The answer from Vassar has always been that you have no colored students. I write to ask you if there has been any change in this rule recently. Are there any colored students in Vassar College today? If a properly equipped colored woman should apply, would you admit her?"⁸⁸ MacCracken returned a curt, two-sentence reply, saying that DuBois should read the statement in the Vassar catalogue that read, "No rules other than those there stated govern the admission of students."⁸⁹ Despite this response, the reality was that African Americans were neither admitted nor welcome at Vassar. In a 1932 issue of the *Crisis*, DuBois noted that "Vassar is the only first grade women's college in the North which still refuses to admit Negroes. Bryn Mawr and Mount Holyoke held out long but finally surrendered, although Bryn Mawr still keeps its dormitories lily White."⁹⁰

A prominent African American minister from Harlem, the Reverend James Robinson, gave a lecture at Vassar in the late 1930s at a conference cosponsored by the college and the YWCA. In his lecture, Robinson challenged the White women students to improve race relations by getting Vassar to open its doors to Black women. When the students responded that they did not know any Blacks, Robinson offered to find a Black student for the college.⁹¹

Robinson's congregation included an outstanding student, Beatrix McCleary, the daughter of a physician and an extremely light-skinned Black woman who could have passed for White. "Beatty," as she was known, entered Vassar in the fall of 1940. McCleary excelled in her studies and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa. She was also the first Black to be a member of the Daisy Chain.⁹² McCleary obtained the highest rank in zoology while at Vassar, and was awarded four Vassar College fellowships. McCleary went on to become the first African American woman graduate of the Yale University School of Medicine and went into the field of psychiatry.⁹³

During the six years after McCleary's entrance into Vassar, six additional African American women were admitted. Separate dormitory rooms for the Black women were still required during this period. June Jackson, from Cambridge, Massachusetts, arrived at Vassar in 1941, the year after McCleary. Jackson had been an active member of the NAACP Youth Council in Cambridge, and had been accepted and awarded scholarships to both Vassar and Radcliffe. Her aunt, Geneva Jackson, had graduated cum laude from Radcliffe in 1919. Her aunt's accomplishments were a great source of pride in their family, and Jackson said she knew she would have to compete with her aunt's record. She said her parents

were concerned about reports of snobbishness at Vassar, but after speaking with McCleary, whose views of Vassar were positive, Jackson decided to attend. Jackson noted in her housing request that she would like a roommate, but the president of the Boston Vassar Club told her, in a "genteel but firm manner," that Jackson would be happier if she had a single room. The woman said further that the college had been courageous enough to increase the student body of African Americans by admitting Jackson and another Black woman that year, but that the school was not ready to integrate the dormitories.⁹⁴

Jackson's recollections of Vassar differ from McCleary's, who wrote two years after her graduation that she felt she had been treated fairly at Vassar. Jackson, who was much darker than McCleary in complexion and appeared to have a more heightened consciousness about racial issues, said she was denied entrance into a Poughkeepsie skating rink where she had gone with a group of students because she was Black. She recalled that she could not find a room to rent for her freshman prom date, who was also visibly African American; in her sophomore year, a White roommate rented a room for her. Jackson said that a professor expressed surprise about a well-written paper she submitted, stating that "it didn't sound like a Negro's writing." Most of the White students' only previous interaction with African American women had been with their maids, and they repeatedly asked Jackson simplistic questions about race and told her she didn't talk like an African American. Their surprise at meeting an articulate, intelligent Black woman was symptomatic of the prevailing view of most Whites toward African Americans. As Jackson recalled, "Sometimes my personal pain at racist incidents was so deep that I could not share it with my new-found White friends until a greater sense of trust had developed." During Jackson's last years at Vassar, she lived in a cooperative house on campus where twenty women lived, studied, cooked, ate, and socialized together. Jackson was the only African American housemate, but she recalled that another woman of color lived in the house.⁹⁵

Several other African American women were admitted to Vassar during World War II. These included Marie Lawrence, a day student from an old and prominent Poughkeepsie family who graduated in 1945 and later earned a masters degree in social work from Smith College; her sister, Stadella Lawrence, who graduated in 1947; and Olive Thurman, the daughter of renowned theologian Howard Thurman, then dean of the chapel at Howard University, who graduated in 1948. W.E.B. DuBois spoke at Vassar in 1942 and challenged the college of twelve hundred students to admit one hundred African American women, stating that the token number of African American women was ridiculously small, given the size of the student body. He pointed out that the acute racial problem in the United States caused most Blacks to be excluded from the best education, the best jobs, the best living accommodations, and everything that would allow them the opportunity to display their ability. DuBois noted that the cultural patterns of the United States, which continually upheld White superiority, must give way to the democratic ideals that were "preached much but practiced so little."⁹⁶

But neither Vassar nor the United States was ready for true integration or the practice of democratic ideals. In the 1940s, only seven Black women graduated from Vassar. For nearly twenty-five years after McCleary was admitted in 1940, Vassar admitted no more than three African Americans in any given year. In some years, none were admitted.

Like its sister institution Bryn Mawr, Vassar had a long history of excluding African American women. Through the protests of people like the Reverend James Robinson and the work of the NAACP and other organizations, the doors of Vassar slowly opened to African American women. June Jackson writes that World War II and the heightened expectations of African Americans had created an activist spirit among Black women students in the 1940s. By the fifties, however, most Vassar students had become more apathetic about issues of race and social justice, and Black women students received a different message:

Even though they were few in number, they were now expected to be there. It could be said that Vassar did admit Negroes. The implicit message was one that fostered assimilation and denial of differences, as expressed by "We don't see color," or "I never think of you as Black." This imposes a different burden, that of denying a part of your identity even though consciously acknowledging your race.⁹⁷

By 1960 only twenty-three African American women had graduated from Vassar. These women were solidly middle to upper middle class, the daughters of professionals. They were the products of integrated high schools of New York and New England, and the renowned Dunbar High School of Washington, DC. These women excelled at Vassar, and most continued their education in graduate and professional schools. But, as June Jackson noted, despite their accomplishments, the early Black students at Vassar paid a huge personal cost:

For the Black woman who entered Vassar during these early years, the lone Black student entered to live the demanding life of being the "one and only," a life many remember as lonely in an atmosphere which was unaccepting and, at times, hostile. Administrators and faculty who might have provided support and guidance or served as role models were lacking. For most of those early students, the college community did not provide a sense of being valued or belonging.⁹⁸

Barnard College

Barnard College was founded in 1889 as the "sister" institution to the all-male Columbia. Given its New York City setting, Barnard should have provided a convenient location for college-bound African American women; however, this was not the case. Members of the Black community believed that Barnard discouraged applications from African American women and placed quotas on their numbers when it finally began to admit them.

Famed Harlem Renaissance writer Zora Neale Hurston enrolled at Barnard College as a transfer student in 1925. Hurston, who was the personal secretary of writer Fanny Hurst, had received a scholarship to Barnard after impressing one of its founders, Annie Nathan Meyer. Hurston was a day student and commuted from Harlem to the campus. Hurston was apparently the first African

American woman to attend Barnard and was the only Black student during her three semesters there. A witty and eccentric personality, Hurston stated that she encountered no prejudice at Barnard. In fact, Hurston felt it gave White students status to say they had lunched with her. In her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography*, Hurston wrote:

I have no lurid tales to tell of race discrimination at Barnard. I made few friends in the first few days. The Social Register crowd at Barnard soon took me up, and I soon became Barnard's sacred black cow.⁹⁹

Hurston recognized the opportunity attending Barnard afforded her:

I felt that I was highly privileged and determined to make the most of it. I did not resolve to be a grind, however, to show White folks that I had brains. I took it for granted that they knew that. Else, why was I at Barnard? . . . So, I set out to maintain a good average, take part in whatever went on, and just be a part of the college like everybody else. I graduated with a B record, and I am entirely satisfied.¹⁰⁰

Hurston also expressed her indebtedness to Annie Nathan Meyer: "Mrs. Meyer, who was the moving spirit in founding the college and who is still a trustee, did nobly by me in getting me in. No matter what I might do for her, I would still be in her debt."¹⁰¹

Belle Tobias and Vera Joseph enrolled after Hurston's graduation in 1928. Tobias, a botany major, and Joseph, a chemistry major, had both attended New York City public schools. Tobias was the daughter of prominent civil rights and religious leader Channing Tobias, who was secretary of the Colored Department of the National Council of the Young Men's Christian Association, the first African American to serve as director of the Phelps-Stokes Fund, and a member of the board of the national NAACP. Belle Tobias graduated Phi Beta Kappa in the Barnard class of 1931, and went on to earn a masters degree from Wellesley College in 1932.¹⁰²

Vera Joseph was an immigrant from Jamaica who had graduated from George Washington High School in Harlem. She had taken the commercial rather than the college preparatory curriculum in high school to prepare herself for the world of work, since her family had no financial resources for her education beyond high school. However, one of her teachers, Irene F. Gottesman, recognized Joseph's academic talents and insisted that she go to college. As a result, Joseph stayed an additional semester in high school to take the college preparatory courses that qualified her for admission to college. Joseph recalled that she had envisioned herself on a residential campus, but Barnard was the only college that her teachers suggested she consider. She enrolled in 1928 and graduated in 1932. Her first year at Barnard was financed by a scholarship from a group of African American businessmen and educators from Harlem, and by a Barnard scholarship; her subsequent years were financed through scholarships and jobs.¹⁰³ Joseph also graduated Phi Beta Kappa, entered Columbia Medical School in 1932, and later became a physician. Joseph, by now Dr. Peterson, said that she and Belle Tobias became good friends and recalled few slights or acts of discrimination at Barnard. As she recalled:

I never looked for evidence of racial slights or discrimination, so if they occurred I may not have been aware of it. I was making great discoveries in my books and classes and was quite happy with my life at Barnard. It was not until my senior year when I discovered I was not being invited to join the Barnard Club in New York City after graduation that I recognized that I was being discriminated against, and resented it. But more important things than admission to a social club were happening in my life; I was going to medical school.¹⁰⁴

Jeanne Blackwell transferred to Barnard in 1934 after spending three years at the University of Michigan. Blackwell had graduated in 1931 as valedictorian of her class from the segregated Douglass High School in Baltimore. She had wanted to attend a Seven Sister college, but her family could not afford the tuition. Thus, she enrolled in the University of Michigan, a public institution with an outstanding academic reputation. Blackwell's dream was to become a physician and she was a pre-med student at Michigan, where she also struggled for three years for the right to live on campus. Her mother became concerned about the amount of effort Blackwell was spending on the housing battle and felt she should transfer to another institution. Thus Blackwell transferred to Barnard, mistakenly believing the situation there would be better.

Barnard officials, unaware of Blackwell's race before she arrived, refused to allow her to live on campus. She instead lived in the nearby International House, which was integrated. Despite being refused permission to live on campus, Blackwell recalled her year at Barnard as positive. She recalled that one of her professors was quite embarrassed that Blackwell was refused dormitory housing and expressed her regret to her. Blackwell graduated in 1935, earned a B.S. from the Columbia School of Library Science the following year, and went on to become a prominent authority on Black literary and scholarly collections. In 1955 Blackwell was appointed curator of the renowned repository of African American collections, the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture of the New York Public Library.¹⁰⁵

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, the NAACP waged legal battles against discrimination against Blacks in higher education. With Black soldiers fighting and losing their lives in World War II, protests mounted against the discrimination and exclusion of African Americans in all aspects of U.S. life. When the Reverend James Robinson addressed an interfaith conference on the campus of Teachers College in February 1943, he spoke out again on the discrimination that talented African American women experienced in applying to certain Seven Sister colleges. Robinson said that it was well known that Barnard and Vassar had quotas for Black women, admitting no more than four every two years. Virginia Gildersleeves, dean of Barnard, issued a written response in the pages of the *Barnard Bulletin* vehemently denying Robinson's accusation:

Dear Mr. Robinson:

It has been reported to me that you stated in an address at the Teachers College Chapel yesterday that Barnard discriminated against Negro students and had a Negro quota which permitted the admission of four students every two years. This is quite untrue. We have no Negro quota. We never receive many applications for

admission from Negroes. If we are going to have a quota, we certainly would not have such a foolish one as that reported in the strange rumor which seems to have reached you.

We always have some Negro students in Barnard. This year our most valuable graduate fellowship is held by a Negro, and one of our most distinguished alumnae is a Negro, of whom we are very proud.

I am anxious to do anything I can to further the solution of this serious race problem, and I shall be glad to discuss it with you, if you would like to call and see me. I regret you have such a bad opinion of us.¹⁰⁶

An editorial in the same issue of the *Barnard Bulletin* commented that while the school might not have quotas for African American women, the issue of race should not die there, and that much should be done. While there were Black colleges for African Americans, the editorial continued, "there are, however, Negro students who are willing to sacrifice personal happiness in return for the opportunity of 'proving themselves' in the North." The editorial suggested that a certain number of scholarships should be earmarked for African American women students at Barnard.¹⁰⁷

As a result of the editorial, a group of politically active White students established a Committee on the Investigation of Educational Opportunities for the Negro at Barnard. The committee concluded that two factors contributed to the dearth of Black women at Barnard. The first was financial, since most Black candidates could not afford to attend. Second, those who could afford to attend Barnard preferred to attend either a Black college in the South, or Radcliffe or Smith, which admitted more Blacks. The committee concluded that it should inform local high school counselors that Barnard did welcome African Americans and that no racial quotas existed.¹⁰⁸ However, since most of the Black students in the Seven Sister colleges paid their own tuition and many won scholarships after arriving on these campuses, this first explanation does not accurately reflect the reality of the situation. Barnard's location in New York, a city with a large Black population, made it accessible to a large pool of Black women who could have commuted to the campus. It appears that the primary reason Barnard had so few Black students was that Black women believed the school did not welcome them.

Charlotte Hanley was the immediate beneficiary of the effort to increase African American enrollment at Barnard. Hanley graduated from Yonkers High School in 1942 and planned to enroll in New York University, but she could not afford to attend. She moved to New York City to live with her maternal grandmother in hopes of attending the tuition-free Hunter College, which both her grandmother and aunt had attended. However, shortly after Robinson's lecture and the subsequent reaction, a social worker friend of Hanley's family informed them that Barnard was prepared to offer a full tuition scholarship to a deserving Black student. Hanley and her mother met with Reverend Robinson, after which she initiated the application process to Barnard, which she had always thought to be an expensive school available only to the daughters of the affluent. Barnard accepted Hanley and provided her with a full tuition scholarship (except for

\$50) to cover the entire period of her studies. She lived in Harlem with her godparents and worked in the community center of Reverend Robinson's church, to earn money for books and living expenses.¹⁰⁹

Hanley entered Barnard as a mathematics major but changed to economics, which she felt would make her more employable. Hanley recalled her years at Barnard as being very enjoyable, and said that her degree meant a great deal in terms of social contacts and employment opportunities. She said that her professional success was due to a Barnard economics professor who offered her a job working as a researcher in the Department of Financial Research for the National Bureau of Economic Research. Several years later she became the first African American hired at the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago as an economist, where in time she was appointed assistant vice president.¹¹⁰

Barnard did not maintain student rosters by race, and thus an exact count of African American women at the college prior to 1960 is not available. However, it is believed that Zora Neale Hurston was the first known African American graduate, and that she was followed by Black women graduates in the classes of 1931, 1932, and 1935. Both Hurston and Blackwell, who graduated in 1928 and 1935, respectively, said that there were no other African American women on campus while they were students. The publicity surrounding Reverend Robinson's challenge to Barnard increased the college's awareness and efforts to attract more African American women in the years after World War II. Charlotte Hanley pointed out that Barnard recruited Black women from New York City public schools who were not as socially or economically advantaged as many of the Black women at the other Seven Sister colleges.¹¹¹ The small number of African American women who attended Barnard in the middle of the century remember the classes and faculty fondly. Though Black students were barred from living on campus, the only other remembered racial slight was Vera Joseph's recollection stating that she was not invited to become a member of the Barnard Club of New York after graduation.¹¹² While all of the Black alumnae who commented on their Barnard years said they had made many friendships across racial lines, their primary concern at Barnard had been the value the degree gave them in their careers and professional growth.

Conclusion

In terms of policies related to race, the Seven Sister colleges are not a monolithic entity. Some admitted African American women as far back as the turn of the twentieth century, while others grudgingly, and only under great pressure, admitted them decades later. Discrimination in housing, however, was a constant problem for African American students at every Seven Sister institution. Even when they were finally allowed to live on campuses, they remained segregated within the dormitories. In 1927, Smith College's President Neilson informed a parent that "legally the College had no right to exclude colored girls . . . but we take care that a colored girl and a White girl never have to share the same room, and we advise colored girls for their own comfort to room outside the college."¹¹³

Frances Monroe King, a Black Mount Holyoke graduate in 1942, recalled that "we did have a dean of residence who did not permit interracial rooming. I had a single room all four years, not always by choice."¹¹⁴ In fact, White students' views on this issue often differed from the administration. King said that when a White and an African American student from the class of 1943 requested a room together, the college's rejection of their request caused an "outrage" on campus among students.¹¹⁵

Many White students joined the struggle for racial equality on the Seven Sister campuses. Interracial and Christian student groups, for example, were very active. June Jackson recalled that the early leaders of the Interracial Group at Vassar, many of whom were Jewish, were criticized for being "too interested in Negroes" — a charge tinged with anti-Semitism.¹¹⁶ In 1937, the Student Christian Movement sent a letter to Radcliffe President Ada L. Comstock inquiring about the situation of "Negro" students: they asked how many had ever been admitted, whether quotas existed, what the school's housing policy was, and to what extent Blacks were allowed to participate in campus life.¹¹⁷ Charlotte Hanley, a 1947 Barnard graduate, acknowledged that the efforts of certain White classmates made her scholarship possible:

I celebrate Shirley Sexauer Harrison, Miriam Gore Ruff [member of the Committee on the Investigation of Educational Opportunities for the Negro at Barnard], the editors of the *Barnard Bulletin* for the editorial of March 4, 1943, and all the other Barnard women, who, along with Jim Robinson, caused Dean Gildersleeves to reflect on Barnard's student recruitment policies. Their strong commitment to the importance of having more Negro students at Barnard had lasting effects. Guidance counselors at high schools in Harlem and elsewhere thereafter were invited to locate promising candidates for admission. By the time of Dean Gildersleeves' retirement in 1947, the number of Negro students attending Barnard, as I recall, had risen to eight — the largest number in its history — an improvement, but still a small fraction of the 1,400 strong student body.¹¹⁸

Despite the resistance they faced, the small number of African American women who attended and graduated from the Seven Sister colleges overwhelmingly asserted that they would attend the same institution again. Many of their daughters and granddaughters have since attended these same institutions. Most of these women minimized any discrimination they experienced on these campuses, saying the pursuit of the degree was their primary goal. While they experienced discrimination, primarily in housing, these limitations did not paralyze them. Most were outstanding students, active in campus activities, and many formed lifelong friendships across racial lines during their years at the Seven Sisters.

Despite these positive feelings, however, not all Black alumnae from that era share the sentiments. For example, when some of Radcliffe's earliest Black graduates were asked to comment on their experience, one woman vehemently refused. The interviewer observed, "[Although] she had an interesting career . . . she is very, very bitter about Radcliffe because of her experience there. And she deeply resents Radcliffe's failure to recognize its early Black graduates and their accomplishments."¹¹⁹

The early Black graduates of the Seven Sister colleges were a privileged group, and they were aware of it. Their African American sisters in the South who attended Black colleges were often channeled into teacher-training, vocational, and home economics programs. While African American women who attended White coeducational institutions found themselves barred from many "male disciplines," the Seven Sister graduates were among the earliest Black women scientists, lawyers, and doctors: Harriet Rice, Wellesley's first Black graduate in 1887, became a physician; Jane Bolin, a 1928 graduate of Wellesley, became the first African American woman judge in the country; Eunice Hunter Carter, from Smith's class of 1921, became the first African American woman district attorney in the state of New York, whose work in the 1930s resulted in the biggest prosecution of organized crime in the nation; Evelyn Boyd, a 1945 Smith graduate, became one of the first Black women to earn a Ph.D. in mathematics (Yale, 1950). A 1988 study found that, of the twenty-eight living Black alumnae of Mount Holyoke, fourteen became prominent physicians and research scientists.¹²⁰

Shirlee Taylor Haizlip, a 1959 graduate of Wellesley, noted that there were only two other Black women in her class and eight on the campus in total, but to her their small numbers did not matter. She said her closest friends were White, and that there was no consciousness concerning Blackness among the African American women at Wellesley, that they wanted to be viewed just like any other students. Haizlip explained that the thinking of the period was that "to be overly friendly with others of color would . . . set them too much apart," thus Black students deliberately avoided one another.¹²¹ June Jackson recalled that in the 1940s at Vassar, African American women were expected to be assimilationist and integrationist, the unquestioned goals of most middle-class African Americans prior to the 1960s. She was told by college officials and faculty to think of herself as an American and not a Negro American.¹²² Barbara P. Wright, Mount Holyoke class of 1943, also remembered that "there were few Black students [at Mount Holyoke], and although we were friends, we all went about our business."¹²³

African American women appear to have preferred Wellesley and Smith, which were perceived as the most welcoming to Blacks of the Seven Sisters. In a letter to the dean of Radcliffe College in 1946, Mary Gibson Huntley, a 1918 graduate of Radcliffe, said that Smith and Wellesley were the fairest towards African American women in terms of scholarship awards and housing policy. She added that the alumnae clubs of these two institutions were more accepting of Black women.¹²⁴

Early African American graduates of the Seven Sisters were frequently loyal alumnae. They attended reunions, were active in alumnae clubs, gave money to their alma maters, and served as trustees. Having earned degrees from these institutions gave these Black women unprecedented access to people of power and privilege. Fifty years after graduating from Radcliffe, Mary Gibson Huntley wrote: "The prestige of my degree brought contacts in emergency, when professional or racial problems arose."¹²⁵ Charlotte Leverett Smith Brown, a 1920

graduate of Radcliffe and the first Black woman at Radcliffe to graduate with a degree in science (chemistry), concurred with Huntley's assessment. Writing at age sixty-nine, Brown stated, "I always have been and always will be proud that I am a Radcliffe graduate, and find that when questioned the mention of Radcliffe seems to settle all arguments and discussions."¹²⁶ Frances M. King, Mount Holyoke class of 1942, agrees, "I continue to be grateful for having had the opportunity for a Mount Holyoke education. It stacks up well in the world and makes me proud to be an alumna."¹²⁷ Evelyn Rich, Bryn Mawr class of 1954, who did not enjoy her college experience and felt that she was given grades she didn't deserve, nevertheless stated in an interview, "I'm very supportive of the college now. . . . I give them money, and more importantly I give them time and my commitment because I feel . . . that the life I live now is largely a result of my Bryn Mawr experience."¹²⁸ In recent discussions, early Black Barnard College graduates shared the perspective that a degree from such a distinguished institution opened doors and provided invaluable contacts.¹²⁹

While not every Black Seven Sister student was affluent — many worked to earn money while in college — the socioeconomic status and life experiences of most of them were far removed from those of the average African American. Wellesley graduate Shirley Taylor Haizlip, class of 1959, reflected on her fellow Black Seven Sisters:

The hue of their skin barely distinguished them from other students. Like other young women in the Sister Colleges and men in the Ivy League schools, the Negroes generally came from life styles similar to that of the majority of the student body. More often than not, their parents were professionals, conservative in their politics, and moderate in their racial practices. . . . The Northern Negro student's identification with the economically and socially less fortunate of his brothers was tenuous at best. Although in each successful black family there were always some close familiar links with the poverty and the peculiar degradation of being black, strong attempts were made to ignore or avoid any contamination by association. These, and I, too, were blacks of a different color.¹³⁰

The roster of Black Seven Sister graduates from the mid-1960s reads like a "who's who" of elite Black America. The daughters of doctors, religious and civil rights leaders, educators, and other professionals dominated. Jane White and Gladys White, the daughter and niece of NAACP President Walter White, graduated from Smith in 1944 and 1942, respectively. Channing Tobias's daughter Belle graduated from Barnard in 1931; Black Nobel laureate Ralph Bunche's daughter Joan was a member of the Vassar class of 1953; Olive Thurman, the daughter of prominent Black theologian and dean of Howard University Divinity School Howard Thurman, was in the Vassar class of 1948; and Gail Lumet Buckley, daughter of actress Lena Horne, graduated from Radcliffe in 1959.

Many of these women were so light complected that they were easily mistaken as White. June Jackson commented that her classmate at Vassar, Beatrix McCleary, "was so light in complexion, and the student body so unused to the varied shades of Afro-Americans, that she was generally mistaken for any ethnic background other than Black."¹³¹ Nevertheless, these women's high achieve-

ments often didn't change Whites' attitudes towards them, as they were viewed as atypical Blacks. For example, in 1914, when Radcliffe President Lebarron Russell Briggs attempted to help Mary Gibson get financial aid, he repeatedly mentioned to donors that Gibson did not look African American. In one letter, he wrote, "this girl is almost White," and assured them that Gibson was extremely bright, and, although colored, that "she is a colored girl who would easily be taken for a Spanish girl."¹⁵² However, these women's light skin did not prevent their schools from keeping them in segregated housing.

In many ways these African American women's Seven Sisters' education set them apart from most women of their race. It gave them the freedom, exposure, and opportunity to prove themselves intellectually on the same basis as Whites, and opened to them opportunities for a wider range of careers, including medicine, science, and law. In fact, Wellesley College alumnae records reported in 1964 that the number of African American alumnae who had earned graduate and professional degrees was "especially striking" and far exceeded that of the college population as a whole.¹⁵³ In contrast to many of their White classmates, who often married and stopped working outside the home, the early Seven Sisters' Black graduates overwhelmingly both married *and* maintained careers. These women knew that they were expected by other Blacks to be "a credit to the race," and that their success or failure had an impact not only on them as individuals, but on the African American race as a whole. They were race representatives regardless of how unrepresentative they were in other respects (e.g., social and familial backgrounds).

Mount Holyoke, Wellesley, and Smith, which were founded in part on Christian beliefs, were challenged when their policies and practices conflicted with these beliefs. At Smith, the strong influence of the NAACP made the school popular among African American women. Radcliffe was a favorite among African American women for both undergraduate and graduate study. Radcliffe President Lebarron Russell Briggs was close friends with NAACP board members, and was considered a fair and liberal man by African American students. Vassar, Barnard, and Bryn Mawr were the most resistant to admitting African American women. As noted above, throughout the presidency of M. Carey Thomas, no African American woman attended Bryn Mawr. Her negative and stereotypical views of African Americans are a matter of record. Key personnel at the Seven Sisters made the difference in the treatment of African Americans and their ability to matriculate in these institutions. Historian Rosalind Rosenberg noted that Virginia Gildersleeves, dean of Barnard from 1911-1946, "welcomed Jewish students and faculty only so long as they were thoroughly assimilated, and she included African Americans only so long as they were well spoken and did not ask to live in the dormitories."¹⁵⁴

In written and oral histories, early African American students at the Seven Sister colleges stated that these institutions had a quota of no more than two Blacks per class. Though there was in fact no written policy limiting the number of African American students at these colleges, there was an unwritten policy,

like the one contested at Smith in 1913. Francis Monroe King, Mount Holyoke College class of 1942, recalled:

When I was a freshman, the only other Negro was a senior. By my sophomore year there were two in the freshman class, thus shattering a long-standing unwritten quota among the Seven Sister colleges of "only two at a time on campus." When I was a senior, two more Negroes were freshmen, bringing our total to five!¹³⁵

Charlotte Hanley Scott, Barnard class of 1947, recalled that there were usually two women a year during her tenure. By the 1950s, more Blacks were being admitted. An article on Black students at Barnard noted that in the 1950s, when as many as three African Americans were admitted per class, Black women at the school referred to themselves as "The Holy Twelve" because there were never more than twelve Black women on campus in any given year.¹³⁶

As noted above, the increased presence of African American women on the campuses of the Seven Sister colleges during the twentieth century was influenced greatly by the people in the leadership of those institutions and the protest efforts of the NAACP. Public condemnation and negative press also forced this issue to a head. Even with the most liberal of the Seven Sister colleges, the issue of social equality remained. The refusal to assign African American women rooms with Whites, regardless of their background or hue, clearly communicated to the Black community that in many ways these campuses reflected society's attitude towards them. In addition, the women were often viewed in racial terms. Letters of references from professors often noted that they were the brightest "colored or Negro" student. College student affairs records with comments like "well bred, deeply thoughtful, possible future leader of her race" reflected the bias and expectations that were envisioned for many of the Black women students.

It was sometimes believed by the administrators of these institutions that most of the African American women graduates would be employed in a Black setting. Mary Gibson recalled that Black women college graduates routinely faced discrimination in hiring and had little choice but to go South to teach in segregated high schools. She noted that a few also taught in New England schools and in New York City. While at Radcliffe, she relates,

in June, 1917, a rare opportunity made me the first colored bank clerk in Boston, where I worked two summers for the Tremont Trust Company on State Street. President Briggs had advised me to go back home and give my training to my people. That was the ideal of service for many decades. It was the hope of my widowed mother, a former Washington teacher. It had been the dream of my father, a Baltimore lawyer.¹³⁷

Thus, despite the "rare opportunity," duty and service to her race prevailed. Gibson spent forty-five years teaching in public schools. She stated that this position brought "problems and sacrifices as well as many rewarding experiences."¹³⁸ Many graduates did break through racial barriers and had stellar careers outside of the African American community. However, some often re-

ported limitations in their careers because of their race. Most of the women reported some active involvement with civil rights, community organizations, and interracial groups throughout their lives. As mentioned earlier, the expectation of the African American community was that those who had achieved academic and professional success would return and assist the community.

The Seven Sister colleges were certainly not utopias, but to many of the African American women who attended these institutions prior to the 1960s, it was an experience they valued enough to encourage the following generations of Black women to continue in their footsteps.

Notes

1. The terms "African American" and "Black" will be used interchangeably in this article.
2. Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women's Colleges from Their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), p. 147.
3. See Arthur C. Cole, *A Hundred Years of Mount Holyoke College: The Evolution of an Educational Ideal* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1940); Cornelia Meigs, *What Makes a College? A History of Bryn Mawr* (New York: MacMillan, 1956); L. Clark Seelye, *The Early History of Smith College, 1871-1910* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1923); Florence Converse, *Wellesley College, a Chronicle of the Years, 1875-1938* (Wellesley, MA: Hathaway House Bookshop, 1939); Marian Churchill White, *A History of Barnard College* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1954); Horowitz, *Alma Mater*; Patricia Ann Palmieri, *In Adamless Eden: The Community of Women Faculty at Wellesley* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995).
4. For a discussion of this, see Rosalyn Terborg-Penn's "Discrimination against Afro-American Women in the Women's Movement, 1830 to 1920," in *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images*, ed. Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn (New York: Kennikat, 1978); Linda M. Perkins, "The Impact of the 'Cult of True Womanhood' on the Education of Black Women," *Journal of Social Issues*, 39, No. 3 (1983), 17-28.
5. W.E.B. DuBois, "The College Bred Negro," in *Proceedings of the Fifth Conferences for the Study of the Negro Problems* (Atlanta, GA: Atlanta University Press, 1900).
6. W.E.B. DuBois, "The College Bred Negro," p. 30.
7. W.E.B. DuBois held a lifelong interest in the "talented tenth" of the race, those individuals who were formally educated. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, he surveyed and kept data on the progress of African Americans in higher education. In his 1900 study, "The College Bred Negro," he summed up the progress of Blacks in gaining admission to White institutions.
8. W.E.B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), p. 7.
9. See Adelaide M. Cromwell, *The Other Brahmins: Boston's Black Upper Class, 1750-1950* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), p. 10, and Willard Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920*. (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1990), pp. 247-271.
10. James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), p. 186.
11. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro*.
12. Cromwell, *The Other Brahmins*, p. 139; Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, p. 114.
13. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color*, p. 247.

14. For more on this topic see Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South*.
15. Carlton Mabee, *Black Education in New York State: From Colonial to Modern Times* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1979), p. 104.
16. Roster of African American Women Students at Oberlin College, compiled in 1984 by Michon Boston, in *History of Black Women at Oberlin Project*. In possession of the author.
17. Quoted in Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, p. 54.
18. Wellesley College Directory of Students, Wellesley College Archives, Wellesley, MA, 1887-1888.
19. Harriett A. Rice, "On the Mountain Top," *Wellesley Magazine*, June 1943, p. 298.
20. Biographical records of Harriet A. Rice in Harriet A. Rice folder of Wellesley College Alumnae Association Records, Wellesley College Archives, Wellesley, MA.
21. Jane Bolin Offset, "Wellesley in My Life," in *Wellesley After-Images: Reflection on Their College Years by Forty-Five Alumnae*, ed. Wellesley College Club of Los Angeles (Los Angeles: Wellesley College Club of Los Angeles, 1974), p. 92.
22. Offset, "Wellesley in My Life," pp. 91-92.
23. Virginia Foster Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle: The Autobiography of Virginia Foster Durr*, ed. Hollander F. Barnard (University of Alabama Press, 1985), p. 56.
24. Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, p. 58.
25. Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, p. 58. In 1926, Virginia Foster married Clifford Durr. Durr was a former Rhodes scholar and prominent lawyer in Birmingham, Alabama. Despite Foster Durr's attitudes towards race while at Wellesley, by the 1950s she and her husband were living in Montgomery, Alabama, and had become active civil rights advocates. Her husband Clifford accompanied African American attorney E. D. Nixon when he bailed Rosa Parks out of jail after she was arrested for refusing to give up her bus seat to a White rider in 1955.
26. Letter from the Department of Biblical History to President Ellen Pendleton, Wellesley College, May 6, 1932, President's Office Papers, Residence Halls (1918-1967), Wellesley College Archives, Wellesley, MA.
27. Ruth H. Lindsay, Dean of Residence, Wellesley College, to Mary Chase, Charlotte, North Carolina, May 9, 1949, President's Office Papers, Residence Halls (1918-1967), Wellesley College Archives, Wellesley, MA.
28. As mentioned earlier, Mount Holyoke graduated a Black woman from its seminary in 1883.
29. Ella Elbert Smith, class of 1988, Alumnae Questionnaire of 1951, Wellesley Alumnae Records, Wellesley College Archives, Wellesley, MA.
30. Smith, Alumnae Questionnaire of 1951.
31. Ella Elbert Smith, class of 1988, biographical folder, Wellesley College Alumnae Records, Wellesley College Archives, Wellesley, MA.
32. Henry Parsons Dowse, *Radcliffe College* (Boston: H. B. Humphrey, 1913), n.p.
33. Alberta Scott biographical data sheet, Radcliffe College Collection of Biographical Data on African American Students, p. 1, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, MA.
34. Mary Gibson Huntley, "Radcliffe in My Life," May 1968, Mary Gibson Huntley Papers, Box 10, folder 4, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, MA.
35. Lebaron Russell Briggs to Mary Church Terrell, October 16, 1914, Briggs Papers, Box 7, folder 53, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, MA.
36. See various correspondence on this issue in the Mary Gibson Huntley Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, MA.
37. Lebaron Russell Briggs to Mary Church Terrell, October 16, 1914, Briggs Papers, Box 7, folder 53, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, MA.

38. Lebarron Russell Briggs to Rev. W. H. van Allen, October 21, 1916, Briggs Papers, Box 2, p. 677, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, MA.
39. Lebarron Russell Briggs to Mrs. S. Burt Wolbach, November 7, 1916, Briggs Papers, Box 2, p. 713, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, MA.
40. Lebarron Russell Briggs to Mrs. S. Burt Wolbach, November 7, 1916, Briggs Papers, Box 2, p. 714, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, MA.
41. Lebarron Russell Briggs to Miss Elizabeth Hoar Storer, February 28, 1917, in Briggs Papers, Box 2, vol. 3, p. 829, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, MA.
42. Lebarron Russell Briggs to Mary Gibson, March 5, 1920, Briggs Papers, Box 2, vol. 4, p. 573, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, MA.
43. Gibson, "Radcliffe in My Life," p. 1.
44. Interview of Margaret McCane by her daughter Charlotte McCane on January 1, 1981, The Margaret McCane Papers, Box 1, folder 4, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe College, Cambridge, MA.
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I would like to acknowledge the research assistance of Jane Lowenthal, Barnard College Archives; Jane Rittenhouse and Kathleen Whalen, Bryn Mawr Archives and Library; Joyce D. Miller, Office for Institutional Diversity, Bryn Mawr College; Patricia Albright, Mount Holyoke Archives and Special Collections; Jane Knowles, Schlesinger Library and Archives, Radcliffe College; Wilma Slight, Wellesley College Archives; Nancy Mackechine, Vassar College Library; and the research support of the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana and the City University of New York.