

MAIDS OF ATHENS:
TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN THE INTERWAR EDUCATION
OF SOUTHERN WOMEN

by

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Abstract

In the southern United States the interwar years were a period of significant economic and social change. Agriculture failures in the 1920s, intensified by the Depression of the 1930s, led to the collapse of southern cotton markets which in turn destabilized the traditional plantation economy of the region. As the economic downturn worsened, institutions associated with the old South could no longer survive in their present forms. Just as farmers in the South were forced to modernize to keep pace with new economic structures associated with the New Deal, so too were institutions of higher education forced to accommodate these same pressures. Threatened with declining enrollments, colleges in the South closed or changed their educational focus. For Athens College, steeped in cultural traditions dating from the antebellum period, it was necessary to accommodate progressive modern reforms if it was to maintain the traditional values upon which the College was founded.

Through an examination of Athens College it is possible to identify how tradition and modernity could be reconciled in the interwar South. In the 1930s, college administrators continued to prioritize the classical southern model of women's education while at the same time approving progressive reforms such as the admission of men to the College and the construction of a textile mill where students could work to earn their tuition. Not only did these developments combine elements of traditional southern values and the need for modernizing reforms, a fuller examination of these developments also challenges current historiographical assumptions concerning gender and class in the interwar South. Rather than understanding these categories of analysis as uniform and

consistent, historians must reconsider the importance of individual experiences of gender and class in the period.

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Dedication

To my family

Without your love and support, none of this would have been possible

Athens College was founded to conserve and promote the best that was to be found in the cultural contributions of the womanhood of the old South. Its buildings and campus speak to the language of three-fourths of a century of these noble traditions to the youth of the present day.

-Athens College Bulletin, 1930

Athens College for Women's 1930 brochure for prospective students depicted the institution as a school for the daughters of white, upper-class southern families. Each year, the brochure proclaimed, Athens College "gathers the choicest of the young life to be found in the Southland" and provided them an education in the arts, sciences, and in the "numerous practices, refinements, amenities that are so important in the lives of women."¹ Not only did Athens College students develop a love of academic learning, advised the brochure, they also benefited from "a century of wonderful traditions of the Old South" reflected in the social atmosphere of the College.² While the brochure did not specifically list those traditions, it represented them visually through photographs of students participating in the classical society, playing piano in the parlor, and sketching pictures on the lawn. These images signaled an atmosphere of leisure, learning and gentility associated with the southern antebellum past.

The physical environment of this forty-three acre campus, situated in the northeast corner of Athens, Alabama, further reflected the imagery of southern tradition. The campus, designed in 1842 and expanded in subsequent years, was built in imitation of the imposing plantation homes which surrounded the College. Campus buildings were constructed in the colonial style with imposing Ionic columns and were surrounded with magnolia trees and lush bluegrass lawns. However, the brochure was at pains to note that

¹ *Athens College Bulletin* 1930, Athens, Alabama, Bulletins, 8, Athens State University Archives (hereafter cited ASUA).

² Ibid.

despite the southern colonial architecture and setting, campus facilities were all modern and well-equipped.³

The 1930 Athens College brochure contained descriptions of educational programs and campus life that spoke to traditional interpretation of elite white women's roles in southern society. However in the interwar years, the story of Athens College and, more generally, of southern society became further complicated by economic decline and the changing roles of women. Agricultural failures in the 1920s, intensified by the Depression of the 1930s, led to the collapse of cotton markets. As cotton prices bottomed, many families moved to urban areas or left the South completely, while farmers who stayed mechanized production and diversified their crops. Increased mobility and the collapse of the tenant system challenged the traditional social structure of the South. Modernizing processes also redefined the role and place of women in rural southern society, which in turn threatened the traditional way of life in the South.⁴ Southern women's increased influence in the culture and economy of the South forced directors of institutions aligned with time-honoured rural traditions to alter their role in southern society.

Institutions that were intimately connected to the traditions of the old South, such as Athens College, were particularly affected by modernization. Historian Amy McCandless argues that the development of and changes to women's education in the interwar South can be directly attributed to industrialization and the changing position of women in southern society. McCandless describes how white men founded educational institutions such as Athens College to provide the daughters of the cotton aristocracy a

³ *Athens College Bulletin* 1930, 2. ASUA

⁴ Melissa Walker, *All We Knew Was to Farm* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 7.

college education. Therefore, both the curriculum and school-sponsored social activities reflected the plantation culture of the old South.⁵ As the agricultural base of the region collapsed, and people in the South responded by modernizing agriculture and industry, Athens College had to both adapt to the evolving culture of the South and attempt to fulfill the institution's original mission. Like many other colleges of the period, Athens College struggled to maintain its traditional administrative goals in the face of changing financial priorities. Eventually, challenges to its financial and cultural survival proved to be too strong to resist and Athens College administrators tentatively explored changes to the institution's educational priorities.

What set Athens College apart from other interwar institutions in the South is the way that college administrators adopted new ideas. Unlike similar private colleges which amalgamated with bigger colleges or closed during this period, the Athens College board of directors was able to maintain enrollment levels and guarantee the financial survival of the College due to two significant policy changes.⁶ First, in 1931 the administration changed the College's admission policy to include men: this was an important step towards maintaining pre-World War One enrollment levels, but one that challenged an older set of assumptions concerning the place of men and women in southern society. Indeed, traditional sex roles were reversed at Athens College, in that newly admitted men were not allowed to participate fully in college life. Second, in 1938 Athens College opened a textile mill where students of lesser financial means worked in exchange for their education. The mill was extremely profitable for Athens

⁵ Amy McCandless, *The Past in the Present: Women's Higher Education in the Twentieth-Century American South* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 138.

⁶ A similar private Methodist college, Tennessee College for Women, was forced to amalgamate with a bigger college in 1946 because its administration was unable to secure the College's finances.

College, but of greater significance to the students was that working at the mill allowed them to cross class lines. Labour historians have traditionally linked industrial work with class stratification. However, the existence of the mill at Athens complicates that narrative because mill work gave students class mobility.⁷ These shifts in class and gender expectations in the interwar years at Athens College allow historians to construct a more inclusive and less dichotomous interpretation of southern culture. While certain elements of gender roles or class delineation remained at Athens College, studying the effects of changes at the College broadens our historical understanding of cultural, social and economic developments in the South throughout the interwar years.

Between 1920 and 1940 the South, the poorest region of the country, was almost entirely dependent on agriculture.⁸ During the first World War, the price of cotton reached an all-time high and farmers in the South prospered. However, due to the infestation of the boll weevil, an insect which destroys cotton crops, the cost of cotton production grew exponentially, creating economic instability in the South. The ensuing economic distress was then compounded both by competition from western states, where farmers could produce cotton more cheaply, and the collapse of the agricultural market in the 1920s. The outcome of the agricultural crisis for the South was the economic collapse of rural areas. Both black and white farmers were forced into tenant farming and sharecropping, two systems that heavily favoured a minority of elite landowners over farming families.⁹ Historian Rebecca Sharpless notes that “by 1925, almost 60 percent of

⁷ Walker, *All We Knew Was to Farm*, 6.

⁸ By 1939, in rural Limestone County, Alabama, only 55 of 5288 people living in the county worked in the manufacturing industry. See the University of Virginia Geospatial and Statistical Data Center, *United States Historical Census Data Browser* Online, 1998, University of Virginia. Available at <http://fisher.lib.virginia.edu/census> [Date Accessed: June 23, 2004] (hereafter cited UVG).

⁹ Wava G. Haney and Jane B. Knowles, *Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), 17.

all southern families, black and white, lived on someone else's land."¹⁰ The situation only worsened with the national Depression of the 1930s. Between 1929 and 1939 the total value of crops produced in the South decreased by almost fifty percent.¹¹ Compared to other agriculturally-based regions of the United States, the South suffered disproportionately. By 1938, the situation in the South had become so desperate that President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared: "It is my conviction that the South represents right now the Nation's No. 1 economic problem."¹² New Deal programs intended to revitalize and reform the southern economy had been in place since the middle of the decade, but progress was slow. Middle- and upper-class white southerners believed modernization undermined traditional cultural and social hierarchies dating back to the plantation era.¹³ Prominent businessmen, such as large landowners and bankers, feared they would lose their power if the traditional rural economic structure was overtaken by federal New Deal programs such as the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA).¹⁴ Consequently, adjustments to traditional relationships emerged between planters and their tenants due to federal modernizing forces such as the AAA and the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA).¹⁵

Although southern society changed relatively quickly in the interwar years, the South did not entirely give up its social and cultural distinctiveness. Rather, the evolution

¹⁰ Rebecca Sharpless, "Southern Women and the Land" *Agricultural History* 67, no 2 (1993): 37.

¹¹ The total value of all crops harvested in 1929 was \$6 238 960. Ten years later the crop value was almost halved with the total crop value in the South estimated to be only \$3 265 705., UVG.

¹² Margaret Ripley Wolfe, *Daughters of Canaan: A Saga of Southern Women* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1995), 145.

¹³ Walker, *All We Knew Was to Farm*, 3.

¹⁴ The AAA implemented a program of acreage reduction in the South in an attempt to raise cotton prices. The result of the policy was the displacement of many small farming families from rural areas as larger mechanized farms took over the production of cotton in the South. AAA efforts to reduce acreage in an attempt to increase agricultural prices benefited large landholders rather than tenants, as it was the tenants who were displaced as farms were amalgamated and mechanized.

of the South was achieved through a process of compromise and accommodation instead of outright transformation. While the widespread introduction of industry and mechanization in the 1930s produced an increasingly modern economic base, traditions of racial discrimination and patriarchy remained.¹⁵ Southern Jim Crow laws continued to enforce the segregation of whites and blacks. However, uncertainty in the region caused by shifts in the social and economic structure of the South in the late 1920s and 1930s created, for the first time since Reconstruction, limited opportunities for challenges to the racial subordination of blacks in the South. Blacks, working and living in urban areas, were freed from the constraints of rural patriarchy exercised through the traditional tenant – landlord agricultural system. These shifts, however, were relatively minor. Southern whites, especially in small towns such as Athens, continued to enforce the racial subordination of blacks to guarantee the perpetuation of southern social hierarchies. Although the South was becoming ‘modern’, tradition remained vital in southern life.

Historiography of Youth Culture

The modernization of the southern economy particularly affected youth in the region. As a cohort, southern youth were ideally placed to take advantage of new opportunities in southern society and form their own social opinions because their values and morals had not yet fully matured. In her study of American youth in the 1920s, Paula Fass argues that youth were both the product and agents of change in the decade immediately following the second World War. Through her examination of family life,

¹⁵James C. Cobb and Michael V. Namorato, “Introduction” in Cobb and Namorato, eds, *The New Deal and the South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 7.

¹⁶Pete Daniel, “New Deal, Southern Agriculture, and Economic Change,” in Cobb and Naramoto, *The New Deal and the South*, 41.

leisure habits, social values and schools, Fass charts the 1920s as a period of anxious change for youth. She argues that in these spaces social values developed and were contested.¹⁷ Prominent in Fass's analysis is the importance of education to the lives of youth in the early twentieth century. Fass argues that primary and secondary educational institutions were important sites of accommodation and resistance, where social peer groups, relatively free from adult influence, formed their own social opinions. Interaction among peer groups at school moved youth beyond the boundaries of their traditional communities and led to the formation of a widespread youth culture. Therefore, Fass identifies schools as learning environments fundamental to the development of new ideas and the modification of existing ideas.

Subsequent educational historians have built on Fass's work by examining how students at institutions of higher education reflected or actively shaped American society. These conversations usually center on the northeast United States, as the east coast was the birthplace of modern women's education. In *Alma Mater*, for instance, Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz studies how women's education evolved at the Seven Sisters colleges, consisting of Mount Holyoke, Vassar, Wellesley, Smith, Radcliffe, Bryn Mawr and Barnard, throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and how the standards set by the seven colleges were adopted by other women's colleges throughout the United States. The Seven Sisters are unique, Lefkowitz-Horowitz notes, because they were the first colleges to advance the professional opportunities for women by offering a comprehensive education in the liberal arts.¹⁸ Yet the founders' educational achievements were not a complete break with conservative values. Administrators

¹⁷ Paula Fass, *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 13.

tempered their educational reforms through the design of their college campuses by consciously designing the architecture of the Seven Sisters to resemble the traditional female space of the home. Yet they could not forestall the rise of what Lefkowitz-Horowitz calls a “powerful peer culture in conflict with the goals of founders and administrators.”¹⁹ The struggle between students and administrators for control over the social and intellectual atmosphere of the Seven Sisters in the 1920s forced the individual administrative boards of the colleges to adapt and moderate their education and social goals so as to maintain their enrollment numbers.

In the 1920s, women’s colleges had to compete with the increasing demand for co-educational institutions among middle- and upper-class college women.²⁰ The social value of homosocial college environments was being called into question in society as heterosocial institutions grew in popularity. This shift in cultural values inspired a series of progressive changes to the Seven Sisters colleges, beginning in the mid-1920s and continuing through the 1930s: from the introduction of new courses in business and home economics, to allowing students to go unescorted on dates. In the interwar years, women students enjoyed increased freedom from administrators as their peer group became increasingly influential in shaping the direction of women’s higher education.

Unlike their northern counterparts, the relationship of southern women’s educational institutions to gender history and particularly southern women’s history has remained largely ignored by historians. In a 1985 article, Thomas G. Dyer, writing about the evolution of higher education in the South, noted that while the history of higher education for blacks has been studied extensively, white southern women’s education and

¹⁸ Lefkowitz-Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 3.

¹⁹ Lefkowitz-Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, xviii.

educational institutions remain on the periphery of contemporaneous historical interest.²¹ Nineteen years after Dyer published his article, the study of southern women's education remains a neglected field of study. McCandless suggests that the absence of historical interest in southern educational institutions is due to historical representations of the South as backward and underdeveloped. She notes that historians of education "have tended to dismiss southern institutions as poor imitations of their Northern counterparts.... [and] have often ignored other regional factors that have made the South different, not just slower."²² Images of a region steeped in rural tradition and racial problems equated the South with pre-modern values rather than progress and modernization as exemplified in the North. Historians concerned with social and cultural issues, such as historians of women and of education, assumed that southern society had changed very little since the Civil War and therefore were not pressing areas of study. Lu Ann Jones argues that historical disregard for rural women and their experiences, especially in the interwar years, perpetuated southern stereotypes and allowed the stories of rural women to remain on the margins of history.²³

Many students attending Athens College in the interwar years came from rural middle- and upper-class families in the small town of Athens and surrounding counties.²⁴ These rural women emerged from Athens College with a B.S. or A.B. degree in a period of increased opportunity and change for women. Rather than being limited by their education and class, these women could and did seek out professional opportunities.

²⁰ Lefkowitz Horowitz, *Alma Mater*, 284.

²¹ Thomas G. Dyer, "Higher Education in the South Since the Civil War: Historiographical Issues and Trends," Walter J. Fraser Jr., R. Frank Saunders Jr., and Jon L. Wakelyn, eds. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 133.

²² McCandless, *The Past in the Present*, 14.

²³ Lu Ann Jones, *Mama Learned Us To Work*, 2.

Their stories and the story of Athens College speak to the increasingly complex nature of southern society in the period and the need for historians to redress conceptions of the interwar South as premodern. Women's interwar experiences of higher education in the South, and at Athens College more particularly, were not pre-modern nor were they as progressive as at the Seven Sisters in the interwar years. The experience of students and administrators at Athens College remains a uniquely southern story, one which can tell us more about southern society in the period.

New studies published in the past five years have added to the historiography of the South in emphasizing not only the experience of southern women working in industrial settings but also the plight of farm women, especially during the Depression. Historians are now examining the various ways that southern women living in rural areas of the South challenged gender stereotypes and assumed new responsibilities by participating in the market economy, working outside the home and cultivating relationships of mutual assistance with women in similar situations.²⁵ Jones demonstrates that studying rural women in the interwar period is instructive for understanding overall social, political and cultural change in the region. Rather than relying on historians' stereotypes to frame the broad economic and social changes, such

²⁴ The total population of Limestone County as recorded in the 1930 census was 36629. Of that number, 4238 lived inside the town limits of Athens. (UVG)

²⁵ In the past twenty years historians have built upon the work of Anne Frier Scott *The Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics 1830-1930* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970) to further explore the question of gender in southern history. Several historians turned their attention to model women within the South from both the antebellum and postbellum periods, writing biographical essays. At the same time, a significant group of labour historians wrote about everyday southern women, southern families, and their links to the broader process of industrialization after the Civil War. These works include: Wayne Flint, *Poor But Proud: Alabama's Poor Whites*, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1989); Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost: The American South 1920-1960* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987); Jacquelyn Dowd Hall et al. *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987); and Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed: America's Underclasses from the Civil War to the Present* (United States: Basic Books,

as the beleaguered rural southern woman worn out by work and masculine authority, or the poor rural family who survived solely on the proceeds of cotton, Jones argues that the resourcefulness of women often guaranteed the survival of farm families.²⁶ Financial necessity in the interwar years forced women to challenge traditional gender roles and move into areas of work previously reserved to men, thus invalidating historical assumptions that white women's roles remained static in the interwar years.²⁷

Previous studies of southern women's volunteer work and women's clubs discuss shifts in southern gender expectations. However, only recently have historians begun to examine how these social changes influenced institutions of higher learning for women.²⁸ In her study of southern women's education, McCandless points to "a peculiar mixture of national and regional philosophies and practices [that] has made Southern higher education unique."²⁹ McCandless uses the term "twoness"³⁰ to articulate the multiple cultural values in southern society and demonstrate the extent to which the plantation past guided southern social ideology in the interwar years. McCandless argues that the "twoness" of southern society particularly affected southern women's educational institutions because white women were the individuals charged with upholding the

1992). These scholars introduced the idea of gender into wider understandings of the social and cultural history of the South.

²⁶ Jones, *Mama Learned Us to Work*, 4.

²⁷ Jones, *Mama Learned Us to Work*, 14.

²⁸ By 1880, women comprised 33% of the national baccalaureate-seeking population. By 1910, over 150 institutions of higher education for women existed in the South. Irene Harwarty, Mindi Maline, Elizabeth DeBra, "Women's Colleges in the United States: History, Issues and Challenges," *United States Department of Education Archived Sources*. Available at <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OERI/PLLI/webreprt.html> [Date Accessed: Aug 16, 2004]

²⁹ McCandless, *The Past in the Present*, 4.

³⁰ McCandless appropriates the term "twoness" from the writings of W.E.B. DuBois, but defines it more broadly. Like DuBois, McCandless uses the term "twoness" to remind the reader of the multiple factors affecting southern women's perceptions of themselves. Yet at the same time, she refers to twoness as representative of southern culture in the educational experience of southern women. She points to the many influences, both from within and from outside institutions of higher learning, that contributed to the development of women's education in the South in the twentieth century.

mythical cultural ideas of traditional antebellum plantation society in elite- and middle-class southern society.

Modern ideas, such as women's higher education, had not always been in conflict with white interpretations of southern history. Antebellum southern society valued elite white women who obtained a higher education. A liberal arts college education signified a woman's upper-class social status and improved her chances for a favorable marriage. Therefore, it is not surprising that the first school chartered in the United States to confer on girls "all such honors degrees and licenses as are usually conferred in colleges and universities" was Georgia Female College, now Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia. Fifteen years later, Mary Sharp College in Winchester, Tennessee was the first college to give an A.B. degree comparable to those awarded by men's colleges.³¹ While women's higher education was met with apprehension in the North, because of anxiety over gender hierarchies, antebellum college-educated southern women did not threaten gender roles. Southern society continued to expect women with college degrees to marry and embrace traditional southern domesticity. However, as southern women challenged gender roles in the interwar years, it would appear that middle-class and elite white society began to associate women's colleges with modernity rather than tradition. Even small changes to the rules at Athens College provoked reactions from social leaders in the town. Although the level and type of instruction elite white women received did not transform significantly in the interwar years, changes to Athens College, such as the institutionalization of co-education, prompted conservative responses by elite white society to what they interpreted as modern incursions into traditional southern society.

³¹ Harwarty, Maline, BeBra, "Women's Colleges in the United States," 3-4.

McCandless's study highlights differences in women's experiences of higher education between the North and the South. More importantly, it also examines the tensions between modernity, southern history, and mythical interpretations of the past trumpeted by elite whites in the South. McCandless, like Fass, points to the value of studying educational institutions in the interwar years because they were places where differing social ideas merged to form new ideas. I intend to combine the ideas of Fass and McCandless, to expand the study of women's colleges from a specific focus on education to the ways in which southerners reacted to and formulated their own ideas concerning the modernization of the South. I will focus on one specific all-women's college and question how women reacted to or instigated change in the interwar period; how traditional, rural southern communities interpreted changing gender roles; and how changing educational goals affected the class structure of southern society. I wish to examine the broader role white women played in the interpretation of modernity in the South.

The Experience of Higher Education: Athens College

Known in the interwar years first as Athens Female College and, after the admission of men, Athens College, Athens State University is located in the northern Alabama town of Athens. The institution's history dates back to the antebellum period. The school was officially chartered as an educational institution for girls by the state of Alabama in December 1822. However, it struggled to survive until the Methodist Church assumed responsibility for it in 1842. From that point the school was sponsored by the Methodist Church, and religion remained an important part of the school's curriculum

until the church relinquished ownership of the College in 1975. Although the institution was titled "Athens College For Women," in the early twentieth century it was mainly a finishing school for elite southern girls, most of whom rarely attended the school beyond the age of sixteen or seventeen. Historical records show that Athens College's early emphasis was on Bible study, music, and mastering feminine attributes such as table manners and gracefulness. However, faced with increasing competition from northern colleges and a push for heightened academic standards by the association of southern college faculty, president Mary Norman Moore implemented rigorous academic standards. Moore's emphasis on a core curriculum of science, English, and history gave Athens College credibility as a degree-granting institution. Finally, in 1911, the College achieved the academic standards necessary for an educational board grade "A" rating.³² The rating signified that Athens College's academic standards were comparable to accredited colleges in the North. During Moore's tenure, Athens College had a vibrant social scene; was fully engaged in the surrounding community; and enrollment expanded.³³ With these developments, administrators were able to promote Athens College more broadly as an institution of higher learning, while at the same time promoting its strong ties to the school's traditional mission as a place of education for elite young white women.³⁴

A decade after Mary Norman Moore transformed Athens College from a finishing school to a grade "A" rated college, entrance requirements for Athens College were

³² A grade 'A' rating meant that the College met recognized education standards set by the Association of Southern Colleges and Preparatory Schools. McCandless, *The Past in the Present*, 35.

³³ Elva Bell McLin, *Athens State College* (Nashville: Rand-McNally, 1994), 237.

³⁴ The process of standardization and professionalization of southern schools in the early twentieth century was a product of a more general push towards educational reform dating from the Progressive era. Several groups, including the Southern Association of College Women (SACW) were formed in this period to

comprehensive. Students entering Athens College in 1919 were required to have completed a four-year high school course, be at least sixteen years of age and “present testimonials of good character from responsible persons.”³⁵ Students could take a variety of courses including; English, Latin, modern languages such as German and French, Bible study, mathematics, physics, and chemistry. Depending on the course of study students pursued, they were awarded either a B.S. or A.B. degree at the end of four years. Overall, the women received an education similar to that offered at many men’s colleges, but a key gender difference was that they could also study home economics and music. It was possible to study music at men’s and co-educational colleges, but these subjects were much more prominent at private upper-class women’s schools because of the particularly strong southern societal expectations that women be cultured in the arts. In addition to their academic pursuits, the young women of the College participated in school clubs, individual athletic pursuits such as riding and hiking, and a range of social events. In November, 1925, for instance, an article in the local newspaper entitled “News Notes From Athens College” discussed the previous month’s Halloween Party, upcoming student recitals, and a social meeting of the home economics club at a private home in Athens.³⁶

In the early interwar years, when the economy was relatively stable for middle- and upper-class white families, the school catered to women who did not necessarily aspire to paid employment but were enrolled at the college to learn socially important

promote and improve educational opportunities for young women in the South. McCandless, *The Past in the Present*, 37.

³⁵ *Bulletin: Athens' College for Young Women* ASU: 1918-1927

³⁶ “News Notes From Athens College” *Athens Courier Newspaper* November 5, 1925. Athens Town Archives: 1925. (hereafter cited ATA).

skills in addition to the classics.³⁷ However, what the College represented to the students and the town of Athens began to change in the interwar years, as women's roles evolved throughout the United States. In the North and in the South, the 1920s represented a period of liberation for middle-class women. Technological developments, both inside and outside the home, provided women greater social freedom to explore and broaden personal interests. Young women embraced the rebelliousness of the flapper image, openly smoking and drinking in public heterosocial spaces. In general, middle-class and elite women in the 1920s rejected Victorian conservatism in favour of greater personal and sexual liberty. While women in the North exercised greater personal liberalization, southern women mainly continued to conform to traditional gender expectations. In 1920, an unnamed student wrote an article in which she contemplated what type of woman she had become while at Athens College and, how she wanted to represent herself and be understood. She asked: "have we come from our apprenticeship wholly shrinking Ophelias, the most incapable violet-type of girlhood, or as Portias, the highly intellectual type? Are we Juliets living each moment as we come to it without a thought for the future?" She responded: "No! Let us rather be Violas or Rosalinds, wide awake, modern, practical, a lovely combination of all loved and most admired womanly qualities." She urged her fellow graduates to attempt to do something extraordinary, to find meaning in life, encouraging them to be nothing but the best they could be. Yet despite these aspirations, her article ended on a sober note. As the author concluded, unfortunately "it is because of this very ambitious ideal that the home has suffered.... In

³⁷ In a 1986 interview, Anna Leigh Cook Kennedy of Athens, Alabama noted that she never had and never needed to hold a job; her family never expected her to work. Anna Leigh Cook Kennedy, interview by unnamed high school student, 8 April 1986.

the hurly-burly of our modern life the fundamentals of real life are not being taught.”³⁸ By responding to the question first with enthusiasm and then restraint, the student visibly struggled with the tensions surrounding women’s higher education in the interwar years. Her response suggests that although she was not as liberally inclined as women in the North, she does understand that the South was changing in ways that affected the role of women in southern society.

Educated middle- and upper-class southern women were not unique in trying to balance tensions between their traditional role in the home and their emerging professional interests in areas previously dominated by men. By the twentieth century, most middle- and upper-class women throughout the United States placed a greater emphasis on the value of a college education to their lives. Many families encouraged their daughters to pursue higher education because of increased professional teaching opportunities and the heightened social status of college graduates. Anna Holland, a graduate of Athens College in the 1930s, recalls that although her parents did not possess college degrees, they encouraged her to apply to Athens College.³⁹ Although women such as Anna Holland attended college in greater numbers in the early twentieth century, southern white women, unlike their northern counterparts, faced an additional expectation: the inherited traditions of grace, elegance, poise, and femininity of the southern belle. At Athens College, students were expected to follow conservative social traditions adopted from the antebellum past, despite the progressive nature of their academic education.

³⁸ *Yearbook*, Athens University Yearbooks, May 1920, ASUA.

³⁹ Anna Holland, interview by author, Athens, Alabama, 9 January 2004.

When interviewed about her experiences as a young white women in the South, Martha Campbell, who attended Athens College from 1931 to 1934 before transferring to Vanderbilt College in her final year, remembers going to the homes of female alumni for tea and discussing subjects such as fashion, weather, and church. Rarely did the women address more weighty topics like the nature of politics and social developments in the South.⁴⁰ As the New Deal and other government programs took effect in the South, tensions between modernity and tradition surfaced. Women attending institutions such as Athens College experienced this friction first-hand because of the College's strong ties to southern tradition. For example, while the coursework of Athens College students encouraged rigorous, modern academic standards, social activities encouraged by College administrators continued to promote cultural values associated with traditional southern womanhood. Former student Louise Steele recalls that in the 1930s she was encouraged by several faculty members to pursue postgraduate work in medicine at Columbia University. However, she also remembers believing that an important goal of the College was to train the students to be 'ladies'.⁴¹ For Steele, Athens College's emphasis on traditional feminine behavior directly contradicted the faculty encouragement she received to continue with her studies beyond her B.S. degree. Like women college graduates in the North, Steele faced limited professional opportunities because of social obstacles. However, students like Steele also had to contend with traditional southern social expectations which appeared to contradict modern educational reforms.

At a time when young college women at northeastern colleges argued for increased freedoms and professional opportunities, old-fashioned traditions remained an

⁴⁰ Martha Campbell, telephone interview by author, 14 March 2004.

⁴¹ Louise Steele, interview by author, Athens, Alabama, 9 January 2004.

essential part of Athens College's student life. This reflected the more conservative aspects of the institution's mission and the patriarchal attitude of its administrators. For example, whereas students living in residence at the Seven Sisters colleges were agitating to end the practice of *loco parentis* in the 1930s, Athens College records do not show similar protests. Even more revealing of the importance of tradition to most elite- and middle-class southerners is the extent to which Athens College advertised its *loco parentis* policy to enhance recruitment. The 1930 *Bulletin* stated that the College's "personal interest and guidance extends far beyond the problems of the usual school tasks, to the numerous practices, refinements, amenities, that are so important to the lives of women."⁴² This advertisement did not appear to have any negative effect on enrollment numbers at Athens College as Anna Holland recalls that students claimed every available residence space at the College. In Sanders Hall, one of several residences on campus, Holland remembers that "there was a bunch of us up there, they had students sleeping everywhere and everything. You know, this was in the early 30s."⁴³ Enrollment declined only when students could no longer afford the cost of tuition as the economic crisis in the South deepened.

In the 1930 *Bulletin*, Athens College officials advertised their traditional *loco parentis* policy only one page after promoting the success of its alumnae in graduate programs, a seemingly radical proposition for women in the South. School officials' encouragement of further academic achievement on one page and the promotion of traditional southern values on the next appears to advance contrasting social values. However, these policies were not at odds, but rather reflected southern society's long-

⁴² *Bulletin*, Athens University, Bulletins, June 1930, 9, ASUA.

⁴³ Anna Holland, interview by author, Athens, Alabama, 9 January 2004.

established acceptance of equal education for elite- and middle-class white women and men. What changed in the interwar years is what women's higher education, a modern initiative, represented in southern society. White southern society considered any changes to women's higher education as a challenge both to their interpretation of the southern past and southern social hierarchies. Although the practice of providing women a college education was modern, southern society interpreted women's higher education as a part of white southern tradition. In white social constructions of white southern history, women's colleges acted to sustain rather than attack southern tradition. Therefore, southern elites perceived particular efforts to reform Athens College as an attack on tradition, rather than the logical progression of a modern institution. The reaction of Athens College administrators to white social unease was to underscore the importance of tradition at the institution, in an attempt to reconcile modernizing influences with nostalgic interpretations of the southern past.⁴⁴ Therefore, while administrators appeared to be encouraging contradictory goals, they were actually trying to find equilibrium between tradition and modernity.

Administrators of women's colleges in the interwar years, in their role as protectors of feminine virtue, attempted to reinforce traditional southern social expectations and hierarchies by continuing to protect elite white women by placing them on a pedestal. In the racialized environment of the South, any shifts in gender traditions affected not only the roles of white women but also the entire social hierarchy of the region. As long as white women continued to be socially perceived as vulnerable and in need of protection, the racial subordination of blacks by whites in the region was

⁴⁴ Amy McCandless similarly argues that colleges did not change the direction of women's roles in southern society but rather provided a means through which to demonstrate that academic achievement

justified. Therefore, institutions that were engaged in the socially progressive initiative of women's higher education also reinforced traditional gender roles. For example, in 1925, when two white men had, according to the editor of the local newspaper, "been displaying their want of good judgment in trying to flirt with college girls while they passed back and forth alongside the college campus on the previous Sunday afternoon," the editorial board of the *Alabama Courier* newspaper responded by writing an article entitled "Let Every Citizen Rally to Mrs. McCoy [then-president of the College]."⁴⁵ The newspaper guaranteed that

Athens is going to assume the protecting care that is her due over these young ladies... The men of this community will stand back of and give their moral and physical support to Mrs. McCoy in her effort to make the college a real home for the young ladies under her care.⁴⁶

Town leaders' chivalric guarantee of female safety at Athens College signaled white men's and women's support for what were presented as the more traditional aspects of college life throughout the interwar years.⁴⁷ McCandless argues that the region's religious conservatism, limited access to alcohol, and social expectations that southern college women maintain their womanly virtue, combined to form an entirely different women's college environment in the South than in the North.⁴⁸

The degree to which the needs of students and administrators at the Seven Sisters differed from those of Athens College is exemplified through Athens College's honouring of its most visible "mother figure," Judith Morgan Summers, known as "Little

among women was not incongruent with the ladylike demeanor. McCandless, *The Past in the Present*, 82.

⁴⁵ *The Alabama Courier*, 22 October 1925, ATA.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Traditional aspects of southern life included the practice of *loco parentis*. For an explanation of the term see page 18.

⁴⁸ McCandless, *The Past in the Present*, 128-30.

Mother.”⁴⁹ In elite southern society, mother – daughter relationships served as an essential link to ensure the perpetuation of conservative southern traditions. W. Fitzhugh Brundage argues that elite white women who grew up prior to World War One had a vested interest in the continuation of southern tradition through the mother – daughter relationship. White women who came of age at the turn of the century, rather than trying to divest themselves of a patriarchal tradition, remained committed to a conservative gendered ideology because in the context of plantation ideology, upper-class women were revered and protected by white men. Although in many ways restricted in their views and activities by conservative interpretations of the antebellum past, white women attempted to influence white society through their position of privilege.⁵⁰ As southern social structures shifted in the interwar years, the goals, attitudes, and needs of young women changed. However, students who attended Athens College in the 1920s and 30s, continued to be subject to the supervision of motherly figures acting as a replacement for their own mother. Athens College officials’ endorsement of the mother–daughter relationship assigned college women, who were non-traditional symbols of womanhood in the South, a place in southern tradition.

In May of 1930, the president of Athens College convened a special ceremony for the unveiling of Summers’ official portrait. To mark the occasion, the *Alabama Courier* reprinted an article from the student newspaper, *The Crow’s Nest* which noted how “for many years, [“Little Mother”] has been the College Mother and has won the love and

⁴⁹ Summers worked as one of several house mothers at Athens College in the 1920s. She was revered by the students for her generosity and advice. When she retired, Summers purchased a home near the College and students continued to seek her advice and consider her a substitute mother until her death.

⁵⁰ W. Fitzhugh Brundage, “White Women and the Politics of Historical Memory in the New South, 1880-1920,” in Jane Daily, Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore and Bryant Simon, eds., *Jumpin’ Jim Crow: Southern Politics from Civil War to Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 126.

admiration” of the students.⁵¹ Upon death of Summers one year later, *The Courier* ran another article praising “Little Mother” for her role as a surrogate mother and confidante to the students of Athens College. To the readers of the *Courier*, “Little Mother” not only represented mother-daughter relationships, but more importantly symbolized a specific understanding of the past in the New South. As the interwar period progressed, challenges emerged to older middle- and upper-class social hierarchies. Southern values embodied in chivalric manhood, racial domination and pious femininity began to be contested through modernization of the South. Therefore, it became essential to older members of elite white society to champion symbols such as “Little Mother.”

Athens College’s administrators valued and emphasized traditional female roles and relationships, and consequently students rarely broke the rules. Administrators considered even minor violations, such as broken curfew, to be unacceptable. Anna Holland remembers that “one night we had car trouble or something and got back late, and Miss Church [the house mother] was storming through the dorm.”⁵² Women such as “Little Mother” and house mothers reinforced the importance of traditional social conventions at Athens College. However, continued adherence to social values associated with the plantation era made it difficult for elite white women to define a new role for themselves in the changing South. Their level of education continued to rise to keep pace with the educational developments of women in the North, but their social lives changed little in comparison.

⁵¹ *The Alabama Courier*, 29 May 1930, ATA.

⁵² Interview with Anna Holland by author, Athens, Alabama, 9 January 2004.

Transforming Tradition

On September 25, 1930, Athens College opened for its eighty-seventh term. The *Alabama Courier* described the scene as a joyful occasion, with every female student full of anticipation and excitement for the new term. New and returning students “who were present to begin their year’s work wore happy smiles. All the world looked good to them and their new friends.”⁵³ Hidden near the end of the article was a small paragraph noting that for the first time “the school has adopted a new idea, that of allowing young men who wish to obtain a college education to enter and compete with the young women for college honors.”⁵⁴ Although the paper only granted a few lines in the newspaper article to the admission of men, 1930 was a momentous year in the history of Athens College. For the first time young men had been allowed to enroll in the gendered female space of Athens Women’s College. In the South, where patriarchy was extremely important to the continuation of white elitism, it is surprising that young men would even consider attending an educational institution for women. Moreover, studies of Athens College enrollment show that the College continued to have a female majority until World War Two, and the institution’s primary concern remained the education of women.

The onset of the Depression forced private educational institutions such as Athens College to adopt socially progressive policies such as co-education and work programs. E. R. Naylor, president of Athens College from 1930 to 1949, made changes to Athens College primarily because of financial considerations rather than a desire for social reform. In the process of ensuring the financial stability of the College, Naylor also transformed class and gender relations at Athens College and in the surrounding

⁵³ *The Alabama Courier*, 25 September 1930 ATA

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

community. Naylor's blending of conservative social values with progressive educational reforms created a unique learning environment for both female and male students at the College.

Traditionally, historians of gender have focused on the integration of women into men's educational institutions for two reasons. Women perceived equality in education as an important step towards gender equality. Second, as men's educational institutions became co-educational, women established themselves as intellectual equals. However, the case of Athens College reverses historians' traditional narrative of gender integration in higher education. The integration of men into women's schools demands a reconsideration of how historians interpret and employ gender in analyses of southern society.

In the South, women's demands for co-education had been ongoing since the late 1800s. Women who fought for the integration of all-men's institutions generally desired a wider variety of post-secondary options. Private all-women's colleges usually charged substantial tuition fees, which not all families could afford. Also, all-women's institutions were more often than not religiously affiliated and thus socially conservative. As modernization in the interwar years progressed, some women attended co-educational colleges because they did not want to be subject to conservative rules and regulations practiced at private colleges. Women could also choose to attend schools annexed to the major men's public colleges. However, women's annex colleges did not offer the same wide variety of courses available to men. Southern women had many reasons to fight for co-education. Those applying for admission to men's colleges continually met with strict opposition. Administrators at men's institutions believed that the presence of women on

campus would ruin academic standards, destroy college traditions and distract men from their studies.⁵⁵ Eventually, despite strident opposition by male students, faculty and some parents, universities in the South gradually became co-educational.⁵⁶ It was no longer financially feasible for public institutions, subject to government funding, to hold off the integration of females by establishing separate schools or auxillary schools for women. With fewer families able to send their children to college during the Depression, not only did attendance fall, but so did state revenues. In an effort to cut costs, public colleges and universities amalgamated and co-education was implemented. The integration of women into men's institutions then did not necessarily signal gender equality in the South but was a step towards the goal of gender parity.

The implementation of co-education at Athens College occurred because the school faced many of the same challenges as all-men's colleges. Interviews with former students and newspaper articles from the period detailing the financial status of Athens College clearly demonstrate that men were admitted to the College for financial reasons. Like the administrators of many men's educational institutions, the leaders of Athens College did not celebrate co-education as a momentous occasion.⁵⁷ In the newspaper article celebrating the eighty-seventh term of the College, it was clear that women students continued to be the College's central priority. The lack of enthusiasm for the admission of male students, along with the board's resistance in changing the name of the institution from Athens Women's College to Athens College, signaled that the

⁵⁵ McCandless, *The Past in the Present*, 93.

⁵⁶ McCandless, *The Past in the Present*, 100.

⁵⁷ The Alabama Courier of 27 November 1930, disclosed the financial status of Athens College. The article revealed that the College was \$125 000 in debt and was in desperate need of \$50 000 to hold off creditors. The financial status of the College in 1930 was in stark contrast to the financial status of the College only two years earlier. On August 9, 1928, then-President Mary Norman Moore announced that Athens College

administration anticipated that the measure would only be temporary until such time that the College could recover from its financial debts. As late as 1936, in a section outlining the history of Athens College, the *Bulletin* noted “in 1931 local boys were admitted to the college, although it is not meant to be completely co-educational.”⁵⁸ By 1936, the word ‘women’ had been dropped from the school’s name, but the implementation of co-education continued to be a contentious issue for Athens College’s administrators. Strict regulations governed the behavior and freedoms of male students throughout the 1930s. Like the first women to integrate men’s post-secondary institutions, the first male students generally lived off campus and were not always fully included in campus life. For example, students who attended the 1934 graduation ceremonies remembered that the first male graduate was not allowed to cross the stage. Rather his diploma was carried to him in the audience.⁵⁹

The few male students allowed to live on campus, recalls former student Louise Steele, attended the College on work scholarships. These men worked in the garden, tended the lawn and milked the cows. They lived in the attic of the main residence and were not allowed to receive any women visitors. Steele also recounts that male scholarship students had to work both in the morning and again in the evening, and thus rarely had any leisure time to fraternize with women students. Interestingly, however, she also recollects attending swimming classes at the pool in the afternoon with several of the male students. Strict regulations governed contact between male and female students, but supervised interaction at specified times was acceptable. Men who were awarded

had a solid set of financial assets and was embarking on a financial plan that would raise the College Endowment to one million dollars in the coming years.

⁵⁸1936 *Bulletin*, Athens University Bulletins, 1933-1937, 7, ASUA.

⁵⁹ McLin, *Athens State College*, 94-95.

scholarships tended to come from Methodist families and were generally the sons of Methodist ministers who could not afford to send their children to college.⁶⁰ Therefore, because of their strong religious connections, the first male students were acceptable to administrators at the College and the parents of the female students. White male students were given work scholarships because southern society considered them deserving of monetary assistance due to their religious associations and because they were white.

For many years the College employed black workers to tend to the garden and perform various chores around the campus. However, as the Depression deepened in the 1930s, white male students on work scholarships replaced black labourers on campus. Several former students remembered that white students took the place of black workers because in the financially unstable climate of the Depression years, the college community believed it was more important to help white southerners. The admission of men to Athens College reversed traditional gender integration but reinforced racial discrimination. Even though male students remained, to a certain extent, second to the needs of women for the first three years, white men reinforced their racial superiority through the work program.

The first men to attend Athens College did not donate any of their memoirs to the College archives, and none are still alive. Therefore, it is difficult to know how they experienced integrating into what had been and what continued to be for several years the female gendered space of an all-women's college. Elva McLin notes in her 1994 history of the College that the original proposal to admit men was extremely unpopular in the town. However, opposition voiced by the town elite ceased when the only other option

⁶⁰ Louise Steele, telephone interview by author, 23 March 2004.

proposed was the closure of Athens College.⁶¹ The College was a valuable asset for Athens, and essential to the continued survival of the town in the Depression, especially because cotton, the main agricultural staple of the region, was failing. Members of the town elite realized they needed to accept changes to the mission of Athens College for both the town and the school to survive the Depression.⁶²

Co-education at southern colleges and universities was a widely debated topic of the period. Both women and men's colleges faced challenges implementing co-education. However, administrators of women's colleges had to contend with a different and more contentious set of social concerns. While men's colleges tried to placate male students upset with sharing space with women, Athens College had to consider the oftentimes delicate balance between upholding conservative social traditions expected in at a single-sex institution, ensuring the financial stability of the College, and accommodating the evolving desires of its students. These competing and often contradictory needs forced the president and administrative board of Athens College to find creative solutions, such as the admission of men, to ensure the survival of the College.

The admission of men, however, was not enough to erase the debt Athens College had accumulated in the early 1920s, when the campus had undergone major upgrades and renovations. In the 1930s, then-president Dr. E. Rudolph Naylor, knowing the College needed to find other sources of income, looked to the industrialization of the South's Appalachian region for a solution to the College's financial problems.⁶³ In the mid-1930s, Naylor negotiated a deal with a Milwaukee textile manufacturer to establish a

⁶¹ McLin, *Athens State University*, 94.

⁶² *The Crow's Nest*, Student Newspaper at Athens College, Athens Alabama, January 1949 (personal collection of former editor Mack Vinson, Athens, Alabama), 2.

⁶³ Dr. E.R. Naylor was the twenty-second President of Athens College, and the twentieth male President.

college-run hosiery mill next to the campus, where students could work in exchange for their education.⁶⁴ In the *Decatur Daily* of July 1942, Athens College advertised its “earn to learn program,” stating that students interested in working their way through college could “sign a four-year contract to work twelve hundred hours during each twelve month period, in return for which the college guarantees him [or her] all living expenses and tuition throughout his entire degree program.”⁶⁵

The program was an incredible success, allowing white women and a small number of white men lacking the means to pay for their education to pursue a degree. In the first year, president Naylor received over 2300 applications for only 150 positions. Naylor recounted several years later how “the most heart-breaking job I ever had was picking out the 150. I had to say ‘no’ to so many hundreds who deserved the chance.”⁶⁶ The establishment of the mill was beneficial not only to the students, but also to the school and the manufacturer. In return for helping the College, the parent company of the mill was guaranteed a constant and reliable source of labour.

Work programs for students were not new to Athens College in the interwar period. Declining student enrollment forced Athens College administrators to recruit students who were not from elite families in the region. While her parents were cotton farmers and were not college-educated, Steele remembers “we [she and her brothers] were brought up to want to be educated and do things,” even if it meant working on campus to pay for their own tuition.⁶⁷ In the early 1930s, Steele worked as a server in

⁶⁴ There is some debate among former students of the College as to the location of the original manufacturer. It is reported in the official history of the College that Dr. Naylor went to Chicago, while several former students suggested the head office for the company was located in Milwaukee.

⁶⁵ McLin, *Athens State College*, 97.

⁶⁶ *The Crow's Nest*, Student Newspaper, Athens Alabama, December 1948 (Personal Collection of former editor, Mack Vinson, Alabama), 3.

⁶⁷ Anna Holland, interview by author, 9 January 2004.

the dining hall during her first year at the College.⁶⁸ After working in the meal hall for a year, Steele was asked by Dr. Naylor to run the campus shop and bookstore. Steele was one of many students who worked various jobs on campus in the early 1930s to offset the cost of their education. While she recalls that many friendships formed between students who worked for their tuition and those who did not, she did mention that a class division existed among students: "the College was divided between the sheep and the goats. The sheep lived down at Sanders Hall and didn't work and we lived up in Founders."⁶⁹ While students on work scholarships and students paying full tuition attended the same classes and activities, campus living arrangements signaled a students' social status. The College may have broadened its student base, but it continued to differentiate between the classes in other ways.

The board of directors decided to provide employment opportunities to women in the meal hall and snack shop, as these types of jobs resembled the forms of work women performed in the home. The absence of any recorded protests against women working on campus suggests that the board felt that if women such as Anna Holland needed to work outside the home, then as long as they engaged in domestic rather than industrial labour, they were not challenging traditional gender stereotypes. Monthly magazines such as *The Progressive Farmer* also supported the maintenance of traditional gender roles. Between news on the latest farming techniques and suggestions for the proper maintenance of the kitchen, articles urged women to remain pure, pious and submissive. Although women faced social pressure to focus on domestic duties and maintain their

⁶⁸While the servers in the meal hall were students, and therefore white, Anna Holland made specific reference to the Black kitchen staff performing labour intensive tasks such as dishwashing. Anna Holland, interview by author 9 January 2004.

⁶⁹ Ibid

womanly graces, many rural women during the Depression could not afford to work exclusively in the home. Families who owned their own farms often needed the entire household to help in the fields during planting and harvesting seasons. Anna Holland recalls that prior to attending college "I worked in the field some, in the cotton patch some. Not long ago a woman says did you ever pick cotton and I say yes! I have picked cotton."⁷⁰ In addition to helping their families in the field, Lu Ann Jones argues that many middle-class women looked to emerging industries, such as poultry, to provide extra money. Rural middle-class women struggled to find a social balance in the interwar years as the failing agricultural economy pushed them further into areas of paid employment while social conventions continued to emphasize the importance of the home.

White southerners grew increasingly concerned with maintaining traditional southern social hierarchies as modern initiatives such as mechanization changed the physical and social structure of the South. Therefore, it is not surprising that certain elite- and middle-class members of the town of Athens were not pleased with the construction of the mill. An individual who was close to Naylor said the president felt that the cotton aristocracy viewed Athens College as a place of culture. To bring in a factory would be attack that culture and thus destabilize the town.⁷¹ Members of upper-class families living in the town did not want the mill constructed as they considered it demeaning to the College, and to the agricultural underpinnings of Athens.⁷² They also did not want to encourage women's work outside the home.

⁷⁰ Anna Holland, interview by author, Athens, Alabama, 9 January, 2004.

⁷¹ Anonymous interview by author, 14 March 2004.

⁷² Bill Naylor, telephone interview by author, 14 March 2004.

Business and civic leaders were perhaps apprehensive that further progressive initiatives would only further disrupt class hierarchies. If less privileged men and women attended the College, they would eventually become members of the educated elite, transgressing class boundaries which had remained static for several generations. Moreover, industrialists generally constructed southern mills in poorer or urban areas, where they would be assured a supply of cheap labourers. Residents of Athens worried that the presence of a mill would ruin the reputation of the town.⁷³ Eventually, because of financial necessity, the mill was constructed despite opposition from leading members of the community. Had construction been further delayed, the College would have been forced to close.⁷⁴

Former students estimate that in the early 1940s, forty to fifty percent of the school's population worked in the mill to pay for their education. Athens College, however, was not alone in offering employment in exchange for a college education. Other colleges in the region, such as Berea College in Kentucky, had a long tradition of offering students a full liberal arts education at a private college in return for a set amount of work. However, Athens College was unique in both its class structure and mission. It served a different purpose in southern education than schools such as Berea College which mainly provided education for Appalachia's poor population -- including men and women, white and black -- who would otherwise be unable to attain a post-secondary degree.⁷⁵ Throughout the interwar years, the primary goal of Athens College was to

⁷³ Generally, people living within the town of Athens were either professionals or large property owners. Anonymous, telephone interview by author, 14 March 2004.

⁷⁴ Mack Vinson, telephone interview by author, 14 March 2004.

⁷⁵ Abolitionist John G. Fee established Berea College for the express purpose of providing a privately funded liberal arts education in an interracial setting in the Appalachia Region. To fulfill its mission, in the late nineteenth century, the school established a work program for students who were otherwise unable to afford the College's tuition.

educate the daughters of elite southern families. Even though the mill was constructed to recruit students of lesser financial means, that goal did not change. Despite the presence of the mill, the town of Athens did not evolve into a mill town as had other southern towns where industry was introduced. The town and surrounding county continued to be sustained primarily through cotton agriculture, and the College continued to attract wealthy students. Berea and Athens may have shared similar work programs, but each college was unique because of the circumstances surrounding its development, location, and goals.

The introduction of manufacturing into primarily rural and agricultural regions of the South is a process which historians have recognized as critical to the development of modern southern class identity. Southern mill towns in particular have been important sites of scholarly study because they were one of the few symbols of industrialization in a region dominated by agriculture. Moreover, because textile manufacturing was traditionally dependent on the labour of both women and men, mill towns have offered historians unique settings in which to study the development of women's class and gender roles.⁷⁶ Unfortunately, by largely concentrating on women's labour in mill towns, historians have overly narrowed the focus of southern gender and class history. Lu Ann Jones argues that the result has been a historical focus on white southern women who broke with the past and moved to factory towns, and the historical exclusion of women who stayed on the land.⁷⁷ Jones addressed this historiographical gap by writing a history of farm women of the first half of the twentieth century. However, both Jones' analysis

James Findlay, "Book Reviews: Nineteenth-Century Protestantism and American Education," in *History of Education Quarterly*, 26, 1 (1986): 126.

⁷⁶ Hall et al, *Like A Family*, xiii.

⁷⁷ Jones, *Mama Learned Us to Work*, 1.

and previous studies of mill towns do not account for the industrial experience of Athens College students. Men and women working at the mill were the sons and daughters of middle-class farming families rather than sharecroppers or urban poor. The story of the Athens College mill brings together the separate historiographies of women in industry and women in rural farm communities, and brings forth a new interpretation of how southerners experienced the processes of industrialization in the interwar years. The men and women who worked in the mill identified themselves as students and not mill workers. Their work did not define their class but rather acted as a means to elevate their social status through education. However unusual the example of the textile mill at Athens College in southern history, the mill's very existence demonstrates that previous historical accounts of the development of class consciousness in the South are not complete.

The narrative of class struggle in mill towns provides a comprehensive explanation for the unique development of the region, however, it does not address aberrations such as the introduction of the textiles mill at Athens College.⁷⁸ Rather than Athens College administrators employing entire families, including children, to work in the mill, only students enrolled at Athens College laboured in the mill.⁷⁹ Moreover, students were expected to graduate with a degree and move on to other professions,

⁷⁸ The traditional narrative of southern labour history in the early twentieth century is generally focused on the mill towns of the Appalachias. The history of the region centers around the development of clearly defined mill communities where families from every part of the South came to find work in times of agricultural difficulties. This narrative is especially well laid out in *Like a Family: The Making of a Southern Cotton Mill World*, by Jacqueline Dowd Hall and five other authors. In the preface to *Like A Family*, Hall et al. argue that a new society took shape in the region in the interwar years, as a series of mill villages which were connected together by railroads became the world's leading producer of yarn.⁷⁸ However, class unrest followed the industrialization of the Piedmont region and the development of the mill village system, culminating in the General Textile Strike of 1934.

which for women usually meant teaching or homemaking if they chose not to proceed with graduate work. What makes the mill unique was that its sole purpose was to provide an opportunity for men and women to pursue higher education, not full-time employment. Students were only temporary workers, and their lives were not defined by their work but rather by their studies. Rather than developing a community of workers, students working at the mill belonged to a larger community of college students. Mack Vinson, a former student who worked at the mill, considers himself part of a unique group of alumni. He remembers experiencing mill work as if he belonged to a club rather than a place of full-time employment. Mack Vinson wrote that students working at the mill formed a familial bond because they all persevered and followed their goals together. Many students, including Vinson, went on to become professionals and did not remain industrial labourers. He explained that most mill students, if not all, came from poorer farming families in the surrounding counties, and emerged from Athens College to become successful professors, scientists, and investment brokers. As Vinson concludes “the list could be extended significantly to include many successful teachers, business owners, and other professionals who prove Dr. Naylor’s theory that, if give the means and opportunity, hidden talents and capabilities will emerge.”⁸⁰ The story of the Athens mill, then, is not of class consciousness, but rather of class mobility.

Throughout the mill’s existence, agriculture remained the primary source of income in Athens and traditional gender hierarchies were usually maintained at the mill. Despite the mill’s apparent success, college president Perry B. James closed the mill in

⁷⁹ Students employed at the mill worked specific shifts, according to their academic schedules, for up to six hours per day. Supervisors, who were not students, oversaw the labour of students. Mack Vinson, telephone interview by author, 14 March 2004.

⁸⁰ Mack Vinson, letter to author, 18 May 2004.

the early 1950s. Although the official reason for closing the mill was that the hosiery and lingerie machinery was falling apart, Mack Vinson believed that a contributing factor to the mill's demise was that the new President found the program demeaning to students.⁸¹ Although the presence of the manufacturing plant represented a positive contribution to the College, elite townspeople's discussions of possible negative social consequences to the town because of the presence of the mill resurfaced after the Second World War, and shaped a new direction for Athens College.

Conclusion

This examination of Athens College demands a re-thinking of what categories of analysis such as gender and class signify to historians of the interwar years. The admission of men to the College, and the construction of the textile mill, however unusual as developments in the South, suggest that in the pressure and uncertainty of the interwar years, demarcations of gender roles and class consciousness were flexible, rather than rigid. Many women who graduated from Athens College in the interwar years abided by traditions of southern womanhood by marrying and becoming homemakers. However, upon further discussion with several former students of the College, it would appear that many graduates went on to pursue professional opportunities after they married. Louise Steele recounts that recruiters from munitions companies and other industries came to Athens College during the Second World War to offer men and women graduates positions in technological industries. Steele eventually accepted a position as an analytical chemist in a munitions laboratory in the nearby town of Huntsville, Alabama. Margaret Kaucher declined a similar offer but eventually went on

⁸¹ Mack Vinson, telephone interview by author, 14 March 2004.

to become an accomplished teacher in northern Alabama. Like Kaucher, Anna Holland became a school teacher. However, shortly after assuming her teaching position, school board officials recruited Holland as the professional librarian at Elkmont High in northern Alabama. At the time, she had a chance to pursue her Master's degree, but declined because she had three small children. After her retirement from teaching in the 1980s, Holland was elected mayor of a small town in northern Alabama, one of only a few women mayors in the region at that time. It appears that the modernizing influences present at Athens College in the interwar years played a significant role in the trajectory of these women's lives. They fulfilled traditional expectations while sometimes excelling in untraditional, modern ways.

The story of Athens College in the interwar years is more than a narrative of declining enrollment, financial strife and a changing educational focus. It also includes broader social and cultural developments occurring within southern society between the forces of tradition and modernity. Although Athens College was by definition a modern institution -- it granted college degrees to women -- white southerners perceived the College as traditional because of the non-threatening social meanings women's higher education carried onward from the antebellum period. Therefore, when the College proceeded with necessary progressive steps in the interwar years to bolster its finances, elite white society reacted negatively to what they believed was an attack on the southern traditions of the institution. Elite society in Athens called for a renewal of traditional female values at the College to counterbalance the threat modernity posed to the structure of southern society. In response, college administrators attempted to blend traditional values with economic necessity, promoting traditional gender roles while making

changes to the College which took it further away from its antebellum heritage. At the moment when the need for progressive reforms such as co-education and industrial work programs were ever more pressing, supporters of Athens College continued to push for old-fashioned values. Athens College, then, became a site where the complicated inter-relatedness of the forces of tradition and modernity played out. Throughout the interwar years these forces remained in a state of tension in the education of southern women and, more broadly, in interwar southern society.

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