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A Place of Honor and Fruitfulness : World War one and the War Activities of Women from the Elite Women's Colleges

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A PLACE OF HONOR AND FRUITFULNESS:
WORLD WAR ONE AND THE WAR ACTIVITIES OF WOMEN FROM THE
ELITE WOMEN'S COLLEGES

A Thesis

Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of American Studies
The College of William and Mary in Virginia


In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Helen LaFave

1994

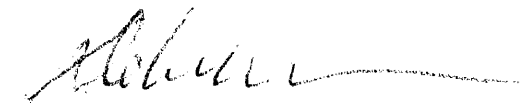
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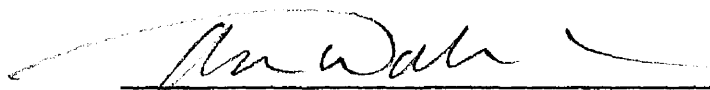
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ABSTRACT

This paper is a historical study of war relief activities of college educated women during World War I. The purpose of the paper is to determine how elite educated college women viewed their role in the war situation and to analyze their activities in the war effort.

The subjects studied are the privileged women educated at the elite eastern women's colleges. The development of the elite education model and the roles of these women prior to the war are defined. The concept that these women thought of themselves as destined to provide special service as a consequence of their privileged education is explained.

The concept of thinking about war is examined. Thoughts about the nature of war changed with the development of World War I as a modern war encompassing military and civilian populations. The idea that a nation at war could utilize women and the ability of college women to define roles for themselves was accepted as part of the new thinking about war.

The roles of elite college women in war relief efforts is examined through the efforts of women on campuses and the efforts of alumnae off campus. Campus efforts included activities of students, faculty and alumnae as well as the use of the campuses for specialized war-oriented training with particular attention given to the Vassar College Training Camp for Nurses. Alumnae efforts included sponsorship of fellow alumnae to serve as relief workers in the war zone with particular attention given to the efforts of Smith College women in northern France.

The success of college women in defining and fulfilling roles for themselves in the modern world of war is seen as further proof as the value and inevitability of affording women access to elite college education. These women proved themselves worthy through their use of their talents.

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INTRODUCTION

"A place of honor and fruitfulness"¹ was the description Ada Comstock, Dean of Smith College, gave to the role she expected of the Smith College alumnae who were to serve in the college-sponsored relief unit bound for reconstruction work in France in 1917.² It was an interesting statement in that it was made by a prominent educator of women at Smith and Radcliffe colleges who was herself a member of the first generation of college educated women. Comstock's generation had to define what college educated women could do in American society. They were the pioneers; the women she was addressing included members of that first generation as well as younger women who benefited from the roles forged by the women who had preceded them.

The coming of the war reopened the dilemma of the earliest college women. The most educationally elite women could be educated identically to men, but after their academic study, what were they to do? Many scholars have addressed this issue as it relates to the first generation of college women. The entrance of the United States into the Great War opened the question anew; now the question was: what were college educated women to do in relation to the war? The possible academic and post-graduate roles of educated women needed to be defined. Ada Comstock clearly thought that the women would meet the challenge.

¹"The Beginning of the End or the End of the Beginning," manuscript, Smith College Archives.

²Louise Townsend Nicholl, "18 Girls from Smith College Who are Looking After Sixteen French Villages" Ladies Home Journal 35 (April 19, 1918)

Women are usually ignored in the history of war. Men usually have led the nations or factions that commit to warfare, and men have done the actual fighting, so historians have concentrated on the experiences of men in wartime. Traditionally, the history of war "exculpates and extricates women from history," according to historian Joan Scott.³ Nevertheless women have participated in war, and the study of the experiences of women adds to the understanding of American society during wartime.

This paper will concentrate on the experience during World War One of American college women from elite private colleges, both students and alumnae, who were active in support of the war effort. These women are of particular interest because of their status in American society. They were the early college educated women in America and the daughters of the professional class that thrived in industrialized America. The college women active in the war spanned two generations. The older women activists had the standard of forging new roles for themselves as their experience as the first generation of college educated women. The younger women had the model of achievement of their predecessors and the challenge both to continue and to expand the work already begun by college women. Their existence was based on a cultural conundrum: they were educated identically to men, but there was neither the expectation nor the opportunity for them to attain the roles in American society that their male counterparts occupied. Adding their experiences to the history of the war expands our knowledge and understanding of them as well as of the war and its affect on American culture.

³Margaret Randolph Higonnet, Jane Jenson, Sonya Michel, Margaret Colling Wetz, Behind the Lines: Gender and the Two World Wars (New Haven, CT: Yale, 1987), 46.

Part I: College Women Forging An Identity

In the latter part of the nineteenth century liberal arts colleges for women were established for the express purpose of providing education for women identical to that provided at the best colleges for men. This was not the first opportunity for women to be educated. Some privileged women had always had the opportunity to be educated privately, and Oberlin College had admitted women, as well as African-Americans, from its founding in 1837. Prior to the Civil War some state-supported universities, including the Universities of Iowa and Missouri, had admitted women. In the last third of the nineteenth century higher education for women flowered in the United States. Most states established some form of higher education for women, either coordinated with already supported colleges for men or integrated into the existing schools. Normal Schools or teacher training colleges were particularly popular since there was then also a huge demand for teachers of elementary students as well as in the new high schools. In the East a number of colleges were founded specifically for women with the mandate to provide a liberal arts education that was intellectually equivalent to that offered at the best colleges for men. For the first time women were able to go to colleges with the same criteria for admittance, rigorous academic standards, and degree requirements as the best men's colleges. By 1900 a number of elite women's colleges were well established in the eastern United States, including Barnard and Vassar in New York, Bryn Mawr in Pennsylvania, Goucher in Maryland, and Mount Holyoke (transformed from seminary to college in the

1880's),⁴ Radcliffe, Smith, and Wellesley in Massachusetts. These colleges provided education identical to that offered at Columbia, Haverford, Amherst, Harvard, Dartmouth, Princeton, and Yale Colleges. The majority of the students and graduates of these women's colleges were the middle and upper middle class daughters of doctors, lawyers, and businessmen who prospered in the burgeoning industrial economy.⁵ Their daughters were as well educated as their sons and, like their sons, had to find a role for themselves in American society.

The colleges developed the same rigorous academic curricula but had varying underlying reasons for educating women like men. At Bryn Mawr College, president M. Carey Thomas was adamant in her contention that "women should be educated identically to and for the identical reasons that men are educated—to be professionally active and advance learning."⁶ Thomas was noted for being an outspoken advocate of women's education. The other colleges had leaders who supported the educational goals but were less forthright in discussing the post-graduate aspirations of their students. L. Clark Seelye, the president of Smith College from its founding in 1875 until 1910, thought that the colleges should produce disciplined women who would be able to influence the forming of manners and morals and could mold society and shape public sentiment as teachers, missionaries, and writers. To Seelye, Smith College graduates were to be active knowledgeable women using their abilities in suitably womanly ways.⁷ Following the death of his

⁴Charlotte K. Shea, "Mount Holyoke College 1875-1910: The Passing of the Old Order" (Ph.D. diss., Cornell University, 1983).

⁵Dorothy and Carl J. Schneider, *Into the Breach* (New York: Viking/Penguin, 1991) 4.

⁶Joyce Antler and Sari Knopp Biklen, ed., *Changing Education: Women as Radicals and Conservators*. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1990) 3.

⁷John P. Rousmanière, "Cultural Hybrid in the Slums: the College Women and the Settlement House, 1889-1894" *American Quarterly* 22 #1(1970 Spring): 50-51.

only child, Henry F. Durant, a successful and worldly Boston attorney, founded Wellesley College to fulfill his self-imposed mission to educate Christian women for “a higher purpose.”⁸ He spent his fortune and energy on the college and considered it an offering to God. Alice Freeman Palmer was the early president most noted for forming the educational design of Wellesley College and, according to scholar Roberta Frankfort, Palmer was an intensely moral woman who wished to develop in her students a moral purity and a sense of divine mission that would inspire them to serve humanity. For Palmer one of the greatest gifts that college life could bestow upon students was an enlarged conception of religion that would emphasize a consecrated serving of humanity. The basic raw material, expressed in terms of womanly qualities, was already there, and education would serve as a release for women's inherently heightened moral perceptions. College would refine the natural perceptions further and provide the intellectual resources for more rational and forthright actions.⁹ These reasons for providing women with a rigorous liberal arts education shared the sense that women should use their education for lofty purposes, but what those purposes might be remained unclear. According to scholar Nannerl Keohane, this was the heart of the dilemma for the college women. Women were still educated mainly to fulfill better their traditional feminine role: to be wives, mothers, and teachers.¹⁰ The first generation of college women had to learn whether their increased educational opportunity likewise increased their post-graduate expectations and aspirations.

⁸Rousmanière, 51.

⁹Roberta Frankfort, Collegiate Women: Domesticity and Career in Turn of the Century America (New York: New York University Press, 1977) 46-61.

¹⁰Antler and Biklen, 3.

Many historians have studied this first generation of college women to determine who they were and what they did. According to historian Patricia Graham, students at the woman's colleges were few, but influential out of proportion to their number.¹¹ Historians have noted that these women had a special sense of mission. Jill Ker Conway, a scholar who studied the college women who became the earliest professional social workers in the 1880's and 1890's, says these women could not accept conventional marriage; they had trained minds and were capable of disciplined and independent effort, and they expected to put their training to practical use.¹² Nevertheless they were not radical; although they shared a sense of mission as pioneers on the educational frontier and needed challenging activity, they still adhered to societal expectations, and their accomplishments rested on their acceptance of sex-typed roles for women. These college women founded the profession of social work and were pioneers in founding settlement houses, both fields where women's socially-expected nurturant qualities could be easily accommodated.¹³ Historian Lynn Gordon defined the women who attended and graduated from the colleges from 1890-1920 as a transitional generation between Victorian and modern America and noted that "female separatism, social activism, and belief in a special mission for educated women characterized their activities."¹⁴ Gordon further pointed out that these women adopted the tried path of women extending their womanly concerns from the private into the public arena by noting that the "very qualities

¹¹Patricia Albjerg Graham, "So Much to Do: Guides for Historical Research on Women in Higher Education" Teachers College Record 76 #3 (February 1975): 422.

¹²Jill Ker Conway, "Perspectives on the History of Women's Education in the United States" History of Education Quarterly XIV, #1(Spring 1974): 8.

¹³Joyce Antler, "The Educated Women and Professionalization: The Struggle for a New Feminine Identity, 1890-1920" (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York at Stony Brook, 1977) 12.

¹⁴Lynn D. Gordon, Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990) 1.

attributable to good wives and mothers—purity, piety, moral superiority, and gentleness—made women necessary actors in the public arena.”¹⁵ Gordon focused her studies on Vassar College women and noted that “Vassar alumnae from the first generation had high expectations and a sense of mission. They wanted to prove, through their lives, the virtues of educating women.”¹⁶ Their success in forging new roles for women in American society suggested that “women could have both higher education and social approval.”¹⁷ An analysis of a survey of Radcliffe College graduates from the classes of 1883-1928 succinctly states: “It was obvious that most women collegians including the professional pioneering alumnae, were not abandoning their female roles. It thus seemed evident that education mainly reinforced the traditional values society held for women.”¹⁸

These college educated women, new to the American scene in the late nineteenth century, pushed themselves to define a place in American society suitable to their education and abilities. Historian Joyce Antler noted that common to many of these women was an unprecedented attempt to stretch the boundaries of female endeavor and to redefine women's role by personally experiencing new options.¹⁹ One of the most distinctive enterprises college women adopted was the founding of the profession of social work and in particular their leadership in the Social Settlement House movement.

The settlement movement was a prominent feature of the early twentieth century Progressive movement in America, and both men and

¹⁵Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*, 14.

¹⁶Lynn D. Gordon, *Women with Missions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 72.

¹⁷Lynn D. Gordon, “The Gibson Girl Goes to College: Popular Culture and Women's Higher Education in the Progressive Era, 1890-1920” *American Quarterly* 39 #2(Summer 1987): 211.

¹⁸Antler and Biklen, 139.

¹⁹Antler, 2.

women were involved. Women were particularly noted because their participation was novel in a public enterprise and because of the distinct participation in this movement by college women.²⁰ In 1889 the first generation of college women began to move into America's cities and establish settlement houses to minister to the local, poor, immigrant community. They wanted to be more than missionaries from the outside and tried to become part of the community by actually living in settlement houses and developing social programs to address what they saw as the needs of the immigrant urban poor. Jane Addams, the most prominent woman involved in the movement with her leadership at Hull House in Chicago, saw the plan for settlement houses as combining the idealism of the bread giver with a scientific emphasis, the desire to lead with an awareness of social restraints. Settlement workers could simultaneously win societal approval and fulfill their self-adopted mandate to serve.²¹ According to historian Rebecca Sherrick, Addams saw the American cities as the new frontier and college women as the pioneers able to forge a role for themselves that extended the nurturing strengths of women into the public sphere of social service. As an expansion of woman's traditional role, social service provided an acceptable bridge from private to public life. College women residing in settlement houses would be able to pursue their sense of mission without flouting social expectations. They would live in harmony with the culture they intended to transform.

Settlement houses were established in all the major cities: Boston, Hartford, New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, St. Louis, Minneapolis, San Francisco, and Seattle, with Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago probably the

²⁰Frankfort, xv.

²¹Rebecca L. Sherrick, "Private Visions, Public Lives: The Hull House Women in the Progressive Era" (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern, 1980) 90.

best known. Women volunteered to help the immigrant masses in the most crowded and underserved parts of the cities adjust to their new life in America. They adopted an area of the city, guided the inhabitants to adjust to and build a new life in America, and in the process found a unique role that called upon their special talents, a role that they thought only they, as educated women, could fill. They sponsored language lessons and programs for children, women, and men; as social workers they visited immigrants in their homes and assessed their needs. According to historian John Rousmanière, they developed a strikingly unique philanthropic organization which combined the use of their superior education and intellectual ability with their role as women and caretakers of society.²²

The Settlement Associations had chapters at the women's colleges and served as a conduit for graduating women to find satisfying post-graduate activity worthy of their educational attainment. As settlement workers, college educated women could use their unique abilities and be pioneers doing needed, challenging work. They fulfilled their sense of adventure by living in an unfamiliar environment and maintained a sense of noblesse oblige; they were special college women developing a new role for themselves in society and in the process improving American society. According to Frankfort, college women's work in the settlements was part of a general feeling that the limits of domesticity might be expanded from the home to the unsanitary city with its growing number of dependent people. College women could work to alleviate the more inhumane effects of industrialization and urbanization.²³ They saw themselves as providing an example to their

²²John P. Rousmanière, "Cultural Hybrid in the Slums: the College Women and the Settlement House, 1889-1894," *American Quarterly* 22 (Spring 1970): 45.

²³Frankfort, xvii.

neighbors and were extremely conscious of their status as American role models for the immigrants. Their education extended their role as women from caretakers of the family to caretakers of the society. College women settlement workers adopted this notion of "social housekeeping"²⁴ and extended domestic duties to the world outside the household enabling them to develop a role for themselves consistent with their image of themselves as unique and destined for greater service to society.²⁵ This role was also comfortable and reminiscent of and consistent with their sense of themselves when they were in college.²⁶ Historian Debra Herman refers to settlements as "real and vital but not a total break with societal conceptions of woman's nature and social role. Settlements could be a home and a philosophy."²⁷ Rousmanière sees these college women serving in the settlement houses as "cultural hybrids."²⁸ They sought to use their educated talents and have an impact on the changing American city. Since both they and the American ghetto were new phenomena, it seemed fitting that college women could develop a positive role for themselves and influence American culture by bringing traditional American civic values to the immigrant poor. Americans were watching to see what this new breed of college women did; the settlement movement was deemed an appropriate use of the talents of the college women.

Women who attended the elite women's colleges perceived themselves as unique. Much of their sense of self sprang from their identification with

²⁴Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*, 14.

²⁵Gordon, *Gender and Higher Education in the Progressive Era*, 14.

²⁶Rousmanière, 45-66.

²⁷Debra Herman, "College and After: The Vassar Experiment in Women's Education, 1861-1924," (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1979) 213.

²⁸Rousmanière, 46.

their colleges, and they maintained ties to their colleges throughout their lives. This identification would continue with their participation in the Great War. They took great pride in their activities, credited their colleges for their successes, and continually harkened to the colleges for support as they undertook ventures never before undertaken by women. Both undergraduates and alumnae used their colleges and educations as the frame of reference when determining their participation in war activities.²⁹ Essentially, once a college woman, always a college woman. Their educational experience set them apart from their less well educated contemporaries.

These college women framed their activities around their perceived unique role in the world and their ability to extend their feminine strengths beyond the home.³⁰ They took enormous pride in the role they forged for themselves and were particularly sensitive to the long-term effects of their activities. They felt acutely that they had the honor of their colleges to uphold and saw their activities as having a continuing effect on the recipients of their actions, their colleges, and the women who followed them into higher education.³¹ Not all the early college women became social workers and settlement workers; many became educators, missionaries, and homemakers, and a few would infiltrate traditionally male occupations.³² Whatever they did they were distinctly aware that they were college women and that what they chose to do was being observed by other Americans intent on judging the

²⁹Marion Talbot and Lois Kimball Matthews Rosenberry, The History of the American Association of University Women 1881-1931 (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1931) 257.

³⁰Antler and Biklen, 6.

³¹Gladys Bonner Clappison, Vassar's Rainbow Division (Ames, IA: Graphic Publishing Co., 1964): 20.

³²Page Smith, Killing the Spirit (New York: Viking Press, 1990) 98.

value of education for women and the particular education offered at their schools.³³ They took their roles as pioneers and products of a new educational opportunity seriously and sought to live up to high ideals they had for themselves as college women.

³³Hannah Hastings White, "Rolling Pins, Fruit Trees and Shoes: The First College Women's Unit to Work in France," The Independent (August 11, 1917): 226-7.

Part II: Considering Women and War

Historians have frequently considered war either as an aberration, something to be finished off as quickly as possible so that society could go about its regular business, or as a continuation of the status quo leaving culture generally unchanged but intensifying social and political trends. The study of war has often concentrated on acts of war in a specified time frame (e.g., military, economic or diplomatic developments) with emphasis on the state of war as an deviation and separate from the normal course of events. Wars were to “fix a specified problem and emphasis was on change for the duration.”³⁴ Since women have generally been omitted from the study of war, it is interesting to speculate whether the consideration of women's experience changes the way war is seen historically. Joan Scott contends that adding the study of women to the study of war expands the focus of historical experience and gives a truer understanding of what history is.³⁵ A new dimension on the study of war can be found by focusing on the college women because their unique role in American society implied that they should find a similarly unique role during wartime.

The First World War destroyed the notion of limited war. Military technology and strategy blurred the boundaries between the war zones and the home front. Women, like men, were mobilized for war work.³⁶ The removal of the sense of limited war expanded the possibilities of women's

³⁴Higonnet, 7.

³⁵Higonnet, 21.

³⁶Higonnet, 1.

participation in war and likewise changed the way war needs to be studied in order to understand its effect on society. According to Higgonnet, war must be understood as an essentially gendering activity, one that ritually marks the genders of all members of society.³⁷ Since gender roles are so marked during war and permeate the whole fabric of society, it is worthwhile to frame the way gender roles are considered. Higgonnet provides a definition of gender relations that uses

the image of a double helix, with its structure of two intertwined strands. This image permits us to look at women not in isolation but within a persistent system of gender relationships. The female strand of the helix is opposed to the male strand, and position on the female strand is subordinate to position on the male strand. The image of the double helix allows us to see that, although the roles of men and women vary greatly from culture to culture, their relationship is in some sense constant. The actual nature of the social activity is not as critical as the cultural perception of its relative value in a gender-linked structure of subordination.³⁸

Higgonnet contends, "Although men still went to war, when they went women followed closely behind them. An enlargement of the female role was implicit in the conviction that women had an important function to perform in serving their country outside the home."³⁹ College women, with their unique sense of self and a newly forged role in American society, were particularly susceptible to the notion that they should likewise find a role during wartime. Since the general society was in flux due to the war, college women needed to re-address their role in relation to war conditions. War conditions of the

³⁷Higgonnet, 4.

³⁸Higgonnet, 34.

³⁹Barbara J. Steinson, American Women's Activism in World War I (New York: Garland Press, 1982) 203.

twentieth century were novel, the existence of college women was novel, and their response likewise was novel. They mobilized along with men, although in very different ways.

The quandary of what the college women would do during the war arose before America actively entered hostilities on April 4, 1917. The war between Britain, France, and Russia against Imperial Germany had begun in August 1914, and many Americans were, to varying degrees, interested noncombatants. Although rarely acknowledged women had previously participated in wars either as camp followers or, occasionally, as fighters. During the American Civil War women on both the Union and the Confederate sides had been involved in nursing the sick and wounded troops.⁴⁰ American engagement in the Great War brought a dilemma to both the pioneering first generation of college women and their successors. The first generation women were deeply involved in social work, and many actively opposed the war, citing war as a step backward into a barbaric past. Others among them saw the war as an opportunity to extend their social work to a grander international scale. According to historian Allen F. Davis, the war forced settlement work out of provincialism onto the international scene.⁴¹ The second generation college women followed the lead of their predecessors. Some historians have noted that these women were more social and less committed than the earlier women. It seems natural that since the primary obstacles to the idea of college education for women had been overcome, the second generation had the luxury of following in the footsteps

⁴⁰Daniel E. Sutherland, *The Expansion of Everyday Life, 1860-1876* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989) 91.

⁴¹Allen F. Davis, *Spearheads for Reform: The Social Settlements and the Progressive Movement, 1890-1914* (New York: Rutgers University Press, 1984) 228.

of the first generation. Their participation in war activities should be considered proof that when a new situation presented itself, the younger women pursued what they viewed as the obligation of the college educated woman to use her education and special attributes for the general good. College women sought to use their training and their unique experiences as educated women to expand upon the work of women in prior wars.

World War One changed the world in numerous ways; college women and the roles they extended from the pre-war work and adopted during the war are part of the history of the times. By considering both the change and continuity in women's roles as parallel to the change and continuity in men's wartime roles, we can begin to understand the place of women, and in particular elite college women, in wartime America. They, like the rest of America, adapted their situation to wartime conditions. In looking in particular at the active support of the war by elite college women, we can begin to understand how the changes in how they looked upon themselves and the roles they defined were influencing American society.

Part III: The War Work

College women participated in myriad war activities which can be classified into three main categories: as students they organized on-campus; as college administrators they used their campus facilities to support the war; and as alumnae they developed programs to tap the special abilities of college women for the new role of relief and reconstruction worker. All their methods were entirely new undertakings. College women had not existed as a significant group during previous American wars and, additionally, this war, in engaging entire societies, was a new type of warfare. The women were determined to make their activities worthy of their education.

An important point in understanding the women who were active in support of the war is to recognize that not all college women supported the war effort. Jane Addams, like many of her less famous compatriots, was adamant in her opposition to the war.⁴² Many college women were involved in the pacifist movement and were very active in the efforts to keep America out of the war and to encourage President Woodrow Wilson to broker a peace settlement. Many college women were likewise involved in the suffrage movement; although there is some speculation among historians that suffragists supported the war and were rewarded with the passage of the twentieth amendment to the constitution, many suffrage workers were not active in support of the war. Ascribing the postwar passage of the right to vote as reward for the support of suffrage women is hazardous since the

⁴²Sherrick, 40.

women active in suffrage were not the women active in war work. Similarly, many of the college women were, like many other Americans, indifferent to the war, just plain uninterested. The tradition of American isolationism was as strong among women as among men. Fundamentally, college women were as divided about their participation in the war effort as were other Americans. According to historian Steinson, "Concepts of a woman's maternal function and her special relationship to war continued to serve as the emotional core for the disparate arguments used by women in peace, military preparedness, war relief, and suffrage activities."⁴³ Women worked for diverse and often conflicting causes, all the while invoking their own sense of special calling and special role as women. Concentrating on the particular instance of college women who supported the war effort narrows the field of women to consider in understanding a part of the role these women adopted in the war.

American participation in the war began when most college students were away from school celebrating the Easter holiday. When they returned to campus, college women had to determine how they would participate in war activities. They quickly organized and pledged themselves to good works, produced goods for the war effort, continued their educational activities with an emphasis on war preparedness, and advocated institutional action in support of the war effort.⁴⁴ Although there were undoubtedly students who opposed the war, the college records document overwhelming support of the war effort. As in the general society, those on campus who opposed the war were silenced by the vocal support of the majority of students.

⁴³Steinson, 13.

⁴⁴"War Activities 1918-1919," Bulletin of Goucher College (Baltimore, MD: Goucher College, 1919): 3.

In the summer of 1917 the presidents of Smith, Vassar, Wellesley, and Mount Holyoke Colleges met to discuss the war effort.⁴⁵ A prime topic of conversation concerned the curriculum at their colleges and how it might be affected by the war effort. The colleges took pride in their rigorous liberal arts curriculum and the fact that they educated women who excelled intellectually. They decided that the requirements for the bachelor of arts degree would remain intact; they did not want vocational courses to cheapen the curriculum.⁴⁶ They proceeded with the assumption that they should continue to train for leadership, with the best preparation being the intellectual and cultural discipline provided by the liberal arts curriculum. Extracurricular coursework related to the war effort was offered without academic credit, and the efforts of first year students were monitored to insure that they did not neglect their academic work. War work courses were given during hours formerly devoted to leisure and did not interfere with regular classes. These courses included: economics, modern languages with attention to military and business terms, biology, chemistry, physics, psychology, public health, problems and methods of volunteer social work, hospital technique, home nursing, psychiatric social work (in anticipation to working with victims of shell shock), clinical work, first aid, social service in wartime, social welfare work especially visiting and relief of soldiers' families, personal hygiene, physiology, sanitation, work with aliens, gardening, agriculture, nutrition, food value, food conservation, dietetics, home economics, statistics, wireless telegraphy, surveying, map making, field geology, automobile mechanics, motor repair, bookkeeping, shorthand, typewriting, censorship, and

⁴⁵Calvin B.T. Lee, *The Campus Scene 1900-1970* (New York: David McKay Company, Inc., 1970) 19.

⁴⁶Typed manuscript, Mount Holyoke College Archives, 1916-17, n.p.

translation. The wartime surge of patriotism stimulated a rebirth of interest in American history and literature, and some academic courses, particularly history, were redesigned to address problems of war and reconstruction.⁴⁷ The college presidents "believed in the increasing value of the trained mind in this crisis."⁴⁸ They foresaw need for trained women to relieve men for military duty and to address social issues arising from and after the war. The colleges, by providing rigorous fundamental training to the college women, would make them ready to deal with and solve postwar social issues. The colleges desired to find a role for college women in the war-torn world but not at the expense of their academic standards.

At the outset of American participation in the war Smith College students telegraphed President Woodrow Wilson urging him to "defend by force the principles upon which Christian civilization is founded, and offered the service of themselves and trained women (alumnae)."⁴⁹ Goucher College students committed themselves to what became known as the Goucher College Plan: students pledged physical preparedness, simple and sensible living, and mental preparedness. They attended lectures, read the daily newspaper as well as magazines and books recognized as supporting government policy. They took account of personal fitness and inclination and trained for service. And they promised to be loyal and to stimulate loyalty in their peers. "I will undertake this specific preparedness willingly and enthusiastically, thankful for the opportunity it gives me to respond to my

⁴⁷Willystone Goodsell, "Some Effects of the War on the Higher Education of Women," National Education Association of the United States Addresses and Proceedings of the 57th Annual Meeting 57 (1919): 409.

⁴⁸"War Activities 1918-1919," Bulletin of Goucher College, 5.

⁴⁹War Activities on campus at Smith College, Smith College Archives, June 1919, n.p.

country's call."⁵⁰ Other colleges adopted the Goucher College Plan; soon young women throughout the country were immersing themselves in what they perceived as their duty to their country. They did not have the civic obligation their brothers had to serve, but, like their brothers, they pledged themselves to service. As young women they did not have any political obligations; women did not yet have suffrage, and as young women they would mostly not have qualified in any case because of their youth. They took it upon themselves as educated women, the guardians of the culture, to participate in the war effort. They adopted America's wartime participation as their responsibility and devised a variety of ways to mold their war activities to their sense of themselves as educated women. They participated in numerous war-related activities, and when possible, organized the activity in a quasi-military manner.

The participation of women in colleges took a variety of forms and the different activities adopted were as similar as the schools and the students. At Smith College all war-related activity was coordinated through the Smith College War Services Board consisting of the President, Mr. Marion Burton (to be replaced by William Allan Neilson later in 1917), Dean Ada Comstock, ten alumnae, and one undergraduate.⁵¹ It is important to note that although the college administration was deeply involved with the War Services Board and although the Board oversaw the war activities of current undergraduates, it was a committee of the Alumnae Association of Smith College.⁵² Hence the overwhelming alumnae power on the board (in addition to the ten designated

⁵⁰United States Committee on Public Information (Secretaries of State, War, Navy, and George Creel), War Work of Women in Colleges (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1918): 4.

⁵¹Smith College Relief Unit, unpublished manuscript, Smith College Archives, n.p.

⁵²Smith College Relief Unit, unpublished manuscript.

alumnae members, Ada Comstock, the Dean, was also an alumna of Smith College). Mount Holyoke, Bryn Mawr, Goucher, and the other colleges also organized centralized committees to determine the institutional response to the war. The presidents and the war committees of the colleges conferred together as well as with the government. All the colleges undertook some form of war-related activities.

Smith College, like other schools, began war activities by taking a census of the Smith College community. Students, alumnae, and faculty were asked to fill out Smith College Emergency Cards listing hours available, skills, physical condition, and status. This information was used on-campus and was made available to the government and organizations conducting war-related work.⁵³ The colleges used this information to assign work to students and alumnae. It was extremely well organized and resulted in a tremendously high rate of participation by college women in the various facets of the war preparation.

The college women sought ways and means whereby the colleges would be most genuinely serviceable during the war crisis. Directly at the outbreak of war the women's colleges put themselves on a war basis, observed rationing, and abolished parties. At Vassar College, to offset the shortage of maids, students volunteered to wait on tables, and abolished the junior prom and class day, and adopted as a war slogan, "no frill and fripperies."⁵⁴ They conserved coal by leaving campus buildings unheated. Like the rest of the country, they had meatless, wheatless, and sugarless days to conserve food. They bought and sold Liberty Bonds and devised numerous ways to raise

⁵³War Activities on campus at Smith College.

⁵⁴Charles Franklin Thwing, *The American Colleges and Universities in the Great War: A History* (New York: Macmillan, 1920) 140.

money for the war effort: first year students donated money they would have spent on class rings; parties were canceled and the money donated; admission was charged for athletic and theatrical events for the first time ever.⁵⁵

Goucher College did not publish a yearbook in 1918, and college newspapers ceased publication for the duration of the war.⁵⁶ Individually, students sold their services to each other as bed makers, shoe shiners, hairdressers, and for other domestic work.⁵⁷ At Smith College there was a competition among student houses to pledge money for the war effort: they raised \$27,467.86 from 2,565 students, faculty, and staff.⁵⁸ President William A. Neilson and Dean Ada Comstock wrote a letter to parents of Smith College students at the commencement of America's second year of war effort in 1918 urging student frugality.⁵⁹ College women were extremely resourceful in their efforts to contribute monetarily to the war effort.

College women's ideas and projects were adopted by other organizations, a situation to be expected since they saw themselves as uniquely able to initiate new ideas and activities and lead others to adopt them. An unusual feature of the wartime educational department at Bryn Mawr College was a college bureau of information and speakers which disseminated war information of interest to the college and arranged for visiting speakers, trained those interested in public speaking on war subjects, and provided speaking material for them.⁶⁰ Organizations throughout the

⁵⁵Inception of the Smith College Relief Unit, Smith College Archives, n.p., Thwing, 140., and "War Activities 1918-1919," Bulletin of Goucher College, 14.

⁵⁶United States Committee on Public Information (Secretaries of State, War, Navy, and George Creel).

⁵⁷Parke Rexford Kolbe, The College in Wartime and After (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1919): 154.

⁵⁸War Activities on campus at Smith College.

⁵⁹William A. Neilson and Ada Comstock, to "Parents of Smith College Students," August 22, 1918, Correspondence File, Smith College Archives.

⁶⁰United States Committee on Public Information (Secretaries of State, War, Navy, and George Creel).

country used the idea of a speakers bureau; most notably the Creel Committee used national figures, including performers from the new film industry. A Vassar College undergraduate started the Intercollegiate Periodical League which collected great quantities of reading matter (magazines, newspapers, books) for soldiers at camps. This project was adopted by the American Library Association which took the idea international and provided librarians and reading material for American doughboys fighting in France.⁶¹ Both these projects conformed to college women's view of themselves as providing models of initiative and action in developing programs to further the war effort.

On campus the students were anxious to have their own chapters of the American Red Cross. They desired to retain control over their war work. The Red Cross collaborated, and soon all the prominent eastern women's colleges had their own Red Cross chapters under control of the schools' war activity coordinating organizations. The schools proceeded to establish military-like methods of production. At Vassar College, a faculty and student army organized in squads of ninety, cut, sewed, and folded garments; 1,130 students knitted.⁶² At Smith College sixty-six percent of students participated in knitting and sewing projects. They supplied their own knitting wool and knitted with zeal and speed continually as they walked and talked.⁶³ They knitted huge numbers of sweaters, helmets, wristlets, mufflers, and socks. Finally the Red Cross ordered all the college women to stop knitting.⁶⁴ All that knitting took up time, resources, and space for transport, and the special

⁶¹"Report on the Contribution of Higher Institutions to the National Service," Bureau of Education Circular (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1918): 20.

⁶²"Report on the Contribution of Higher Institutions to the National Service."

⁶³War Activities on campus at Smith College.

⁶⁴"War Activities 1918-1919," Bulletin of Goucher College, 14.

abilities of college women could be better used elsewhere. Nevertheless the level of community participation and the production levels served as models of efficient war service.

Students got involved with efforts to grow food. Surprisingly, the most urban of the schools, Barnard College in New York City, was most famous in this regard, with the Bedford and Mount Kisco Agricultural Units. The women were organized into squads to work together on agricultural projects. Non-college girls were brought to the school and trained in farming methods. Virginia C. Gildersleeve, Dean of Barnard College, described the summer farm labor of Barnard College women: "girls were examined by a physician to ensure their health. They first work in the house garden, and are later sent out in squads to work in fields. They won skeptical farmers over. Physically they are standing it admirably, especially the college students. They raised, salted down, canned, and dried food."⁶⁵ At Vassar College fourteen 'Farmerettes' worked on the college campus replacing male grounds workers who had been called to military service as well as working through the summer on the six hundred acre college farm to grow food for the school year. The Farmerettes started work daily at 4 a.m. and performed all the labor related to the farm—planting, tilling, harvesting, using machinery, dairying, and canning—at cheaper rates than the local farmhands. Their farm chores were accepted for physical education credit.⁶⁶ Wellesley College students got involved in farm work by volunteering to assist with weeding the college gardens and harvesting the vegetables. At the request of the Women's Land Army, which was concerned about the anticipated shortage of men to work the farms and

⁶⁵T.D.A. Cockerell, "War Work of College Women in the West," *School and Society* 6 (December 15, 1917): 701.

⁶⁶Clappison, 14.

the potential food shortage, Wellesley College established an experimental station and training school for thirty students from various colleges. Instruction was provided in hygiene, sanitation, and first aid to train leaders of camps for women agricultural workers. Since they were working to develop women as farm workers, they concentrated on issues of particular concern to women, such as coordinating the size and type of farm implements with women's physiques.⁶⁷ Mount Holyoke College established a war garden, which expanded to twenty-eight acres, to grow provisions for the college. Students worked throughout the summer to cultivate and harvest the crops. In the second year, the summer of 1918, the farm produced two thousand bushels of potatoes and enough vegetables for 17,400 cans prepared on-campus. Mount Holyoke College Farmerettes raised one hundred twenty-five bushels of potatoes per acre compared to a normal yield of ninety per acre.⁶⁸ Smith College Farmerettes worked on the Clark farm in Chesterfield, Massachusetts, and during the influenza epidemic of 1918-1919 assisted the local farmers in the agriculturally rich Pioneer Valley of western Massachusetts to harvest their crops.⁶⁹ College women took the initiative to participate in agricultural activities. The farm was in most cases not their natural habitat, but in order to find a role in the war effort, some college women went back to the farm. With their education and determination they excelled and proved their mettle by their production.

All the work of college women on campus had strong support of the students. By providing opportunities for the women to contribute to the war effort while remaining in school the schools managed to connect their

⁶⁷Grace A. Hubbard, "War and the Woman's College," *The New Republic* 15(6 July 1918): 285-7.

⁶⁸Untitled, unpublished document, Mount Holyoke College Archives, n.p.

⁶⁹War Activities on campus at Smith College.

institutional missions to the greater societal goal of winning the war. Individually, the students were satisfied with the efforts; college women overwhelmingly stayed in school. The women's colleges had record-breaking admissions and retention in the fall of 1918. College women, through their schools, found a role for themselves in the war and continued their educations to prepare for their roles in the postwar world.

In early 1918 Henry Noble MacCracken, President of Vassar College, declared that the second stage of war service had arrived: colleges should use their resources for summer projects related to the war effort. He announced that Vassar College would sponsor, with the American Red Cross, a training camp for nurses in the summer of 1918.⁷⁰ Their goal was to entice college women into nursing and release already trained nurses to direct war service. This was the first use of any college campus for war work.⁷¹ Some called the Vassar Nurses Camp the College Women's Plattsburg, in reference to the army camp for college men at Plattsburg, New York. The Army and Navy had adjusted their recruitment standards to attract college men; the men worked eighteen hours per day to complete the intensive technical training necessary for their commissions as army reserve officers. The Vassar College Camp was modeled after Plattsburg and was unique in being the only large scale experiment in enrolling women college graduates as student nurses.

Mrs. John Wood Blodgett of Grand Rapids, Michigan, a Vassar College alumna and trustee, originated the idea. She saw the Vassar Camp as "furthering the betterment of the race and solving problems relating to women and children."⁷² Adelaide Nutting of Teachers College, Columbia

⁷⁰Henry Noble MacCracken, "Girls Who Want to Go to France," *The Independent* 94(May 1918): 248.

⁷¹Kolbe, 156

⁷²Clappison, 2.

University, Department of Nursing and Health, participated in the organization and dreamed of enrolling college women in nursing and staffing nursing schools with well-educated women. "This would serve the double purpose of enlisting educated women and in releasing registered nurses to serve in the armed forces."⁷³ The prime force behind the Vassar Training Camp for nurses was Professor Herbert Mills. As a professor of history and economics at Vassar College from 1890 to 1920 he developed Vassar's reputation as a hotbed of reform. He taught courses on social sciences, social work, and charity and corrections in which over seventy percent of Vassar College undergraduates enrolled. He was recognized nationally as an expert on these topics. He set a personal example of social concern and activism by his community involvement, including being Dean of the Vassar College Training Camp for Nurses.⁷⁴

The Vassar Training Camp for Nurses was designed to use the superior abilities of college educated women and accelerate their training. Their previous educational accomplishments enabled them to assimilate 'intensive' instruction more readily than women with only elementary education; presumably they would aspire to administrative and executive positions which were difficult to fill. Women were recruited from colleges throughout the United States and Canada. Prospective nurses applied by submitting transcripts and letters of reference as to good moral character; they had physical examinations to insure that their feet were not flat, that their backs were strong, and that they were vaccinated.⁷⁵ Women from the graduating classes of 1908 to 1918 were eligible. The largest proportion of participants

⁷³Clappison, 15.

⁷⁴Gordon, Women with Missions, 134.

⁷⁵Clappison, 18.

came from the eastern women's colleges: Vassar 44; Smith 37; Wellesley 27; Mount Holyoke 20; the rest of the 450 participants were drawn from one hundred ten colleges in forty-two states and Canada. Over half the women were teachers.⁷⁶ Prospective nurses paid \$95 for the twelve week course; fees covered room, board, and laundry.⁷⁷ The women were given uniforms from the various hospitals they would join to continue their clinical training after the summer course. The medley of colors of the uniforms led the Camp to be called Vassar's Rainbow Division,⁷⁸ a reference to the first group of American soldiers to go to France who were called the Rainbow Division since they came from throughout the United States.

The Camp was organized according to a military model. The women were assigned to dormitories alphabetically and by whether or not they had studied chemistry. Each hall was divided into squads with a leader to give a military touch (four squads = one company with a sergeant). There were clearly stated rules, an organized structure of self-government, and the camp prided itself on military-like virtues of "promptness, regularity, and habits of obedience."⁷⁹ The day was strictly scheduled: the students rose at 5:30 a.m. and lights were cut off at 10:30 p.m. Rooms were inspected daily. Recreation was scheduled from Saturday noon to Sunday evening only. Their studies were prescribed:

The subjects in which the student nurses will be thoroly [sic] grounded include anatomy, bacteriology, hygiene, psychology, materia medica, dietetics, social economics, and the history and ethics of nursing, physiology, chemistry, sanitation, nutrition,

⁷⁶Clappison, 23.

⁷⁷Clappison, 16.

⁷⁸Clappison, 31.

⁷⁹Clappison, 19-20.

and cookery, elementary nursing and hospital economy, and the historical and social aspect of nursing. In addition to work in the theoretical ward and diet kitchen, there was practical demonstration thru [sic] the cooperation of the large public hospitals situated near Vassar. Specialists from Johns Hopkins, Yale, Harvard, and Columbia Universities as well as other schools taught the courses, and the supplementary lectures were given by visiting scientists.⁸⁰

The gymnasium was turned into a hospital ward and “make believe rubber doll patients were made by the Farmerettes.”⁸¹ After the summer training the women proceeded to two years of clinical training at thirty-five hospitals and schools of nursing which accepted the work of the Camp and their college degrees in lieu of the first year of work in a standard nursing school. This program allowed the college woman to take advantage of her prior education and accelerate her training. By January 1921 most were registered nurses.⁸²

In calling college women to become nurses Dean Mills noted that they, as college educated women, had a sense of responsibility, experience in organization, and executive ability. He noted that nursing was not appealing in its old form, but in its new form—scientific, executive, and social-service oriented— it needed women with college-level education.⁸³ President MacCracken of Vassar College said that “thousands of women, literally, thousands, who never before thought of nursing as a career must now take it up as a war service.”⁸⁴ Vassar College’s purpose in forming the Camp was to increase the number of registered nurses available for enrollment in the Red Cross, to help relieve hospitals which had been depleted of nursing staff, and

⁸⁰MacCracken, 248

⁸¹MacCracken, 248.

⁸²Clappison, 6.

⁸³Herbert Elmer Mills, “College Women and Nursing,” *Survey* 40 (April 27, 1918): 94-5.

⁸⁴MacCracken, 248.

to meet the demand of postwar reconstruction work for superintendents, instructors, social and public health workers. College women would be trained for leadership in the nursing field. They were the best of womankind, spiritually, intellectually and emotionally, and were highly motivated. They would bring their intelligence, level-headedness, inspiration and knowledge to the field of nursing and thus fulfill their obligation to serve. "Nursing is preeminently and exclusively women's work. It is, moreover, a form of service in which, other things being equal, the best educated woman qualifies highest."⁸⁵ College women were desperately needed in nursing service which "was the front line trench in war service for women."⁸⁶ By completing nursing training they could "transmute the admirable but inchoate impulse to do something patriotic into various forms of effective energy and become a movement of unique significance."⁸⁷ The nurse who had the advantage of a broad outlook, general education, and high purpose would be able to become a leader in nursing education, administration, and public health work.

In looking to the postwar role of college educated workers, MacCracken pointed out that as men were fighting for the next generation, women had the obligation to see that men did not die in vain and that the future generation was saved from the disease and destruction that arises from war. Nurses would be needed to care for convalescents and the permanently crippled. In addition, after the war colleges and hospitals could work together to eliminate ghettos and poverty. Thus the value of nursing training to college women was not contingent upon continuation of the war. As trained health professionals, college women could use this training to continue their

⁸⁵MacCracken, 248.

⁸⁶MacCracken, 248.

⁸⁷MacCracken, 248.

mandate to minister to the cities as earlier college women had as settlement workers. According to MacCracken,

As far as nursing is concerning, the firing line extends to cantonments throughout the country, to the sick of city slum and isolated country district, to the girl in the factory, the man in the shipyard, the hundreds and thousands of men and women whose productive efficiency stands behind the fighting forces. National efficiency depends largely on the health of the people; and the trained nurse is the pivotal factor in the fight against disease. Indeed the public health aspect of the nursing problem is regarded by the authorities as hardly less important than the military.⁸⁸

By using the campus for nursing training Vassar College identified itself as working for the benefit of the profession, the college, the trained women, and the nation. The Vassar Training Camp's efforts were immediately beneficial to the country. Trained nurses were able to add to the war effort at once by being released for front-line service since the training camp nurses were filling stateside nursing positions. Had the war continued, the college-educated women would have been sent abroad to work in the Red Cross-run Army hospitals; the Armistice ended the need for them to go abroad, but their training insured a well-educated pool of women for leadership in the nursing profession.

The third level of participation by college women in the war effort consisted of going to the scene of the war and aiding the native population in reconstructing their lives. The alumnae of Smith College were leaders in this method of service. The Smith College Alumnae formed, staffed, and funded the Smith College Relief Unit as their major war project.

⁸⁸MacCracken, 248.

The question of how college women and their institutions could help was, of course, a new consideration. There had never before been a situation where a group of educated women existed, had institutional support, and desired to participate in the war effort on the scene. Among the many organizations established to facilitate war relief was the American Fund for French Wounded (AFFW), founded by prominent Americans to organize American relief efforts in France. Isabel Lathrop, a college woman on the scene in Paris, thought that colleges and college women had a unique contribution to make to the war by forming units of women under the sponsorship of their colleges and adopting local areas of France for relief and reconstruction. This would enable rural France to begin the reconstruction effort, enable the women to use their skills in a unique effort, and the glory would redound to the colleges.⁸⁹

The word 'marraine' translates into English as godmother, and the method of adopting an area of rural France and aiding the reconstruction effort was called the marraine model; the idea of being the godmother was very appealing to college women. It allowed them to adopt, guide, rebuild, and revitalize the most devastated regions of France and in the process forge a role for themselves in a war-torn world which had no defined role for educated women. In addition to being appealing to the college women, the effort was supported by the French authorities who were "thoroughly convinced that the very best method of encouraging the peasants to return is this form of work as by our 'acte de presence' we make them feel that we are there to share their troubles. It is of inestimable value to the morale of these

⁸⁹Isabel Lathrop, to Harriet Boyd Hawes, 1917., Correspondence File, Smith College Archives.

poor people.'⁹⁰ This idea of a college helping the relief effort was seized by the women of Smith College. On April 10, 1917, six days after the United States officially entered the war, Mrs. Harriet Boyd Hawes proposed the Smith College Relief Unit at an alumnae luncheon in Cambridge, Massachusetts. By May 5 both the Boston Smith College Club and the New York Smith College Club had endorsed the idea of the college supporting a unit of alumnae doing relief work in France. At the annual meeting of the Alumnae Association of Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, on June 18, 1917, Harriet Boyd Hawes '92, MA '01 formally proposed that the Smith College community support a relief unit in France.

Hawes, an archeologist by training, had served independently as a nurse and relief agent in the Græco-Turkish War, the Spanish-American War, and in Serbia in the present war. She was a wife and mother, had taught high school, and had just returned from working in a hospital on the island of Corfu via Paris where she observed the work of the American Fund for French Wounded. She was the epitome of the college educated woman: professional, service oriented, presuming a role for herself and other college women in world affairs, wife and mother. In her address to the Smith College Alumnae Association she presented the arguments in favor of supporting a relief unit:

Firstly, the time has come, the United States' entry in the war makes it patriotic as well as humane; secondly, the work has come: women are especially needed for this relief work; thirdly, the tradition of active service of Smith College women in the Great War will be very valuable to the college and the Smith College girls of one hundred years hence; fourthly, this is a time of sacrifice.⁹¹

⁹⁰Mrs. A.M. Dike, to Harriet Boyd Hawes, July 3, 1917, Correspondence File, Smith College Archives.

⁹¹Harriet Boyd Hawes, untitled manuscript, April 1917, Smith College Archives.

She exhorted the gathered alumnae not to delay but to decide immediately whether the idea of offering their ability and support to this effort was what they would do for the war effort. She pointed out that they had a unique opportunity to serve and should decide whether this call to serve was one they would answer.⁹² She addressed her own feelings about undertaking the project, pointing out that she had serious misgivings as to whether her fellow alumnae understood the seriousness of the war and the service she thought they were called to undertake. She thought the college women were called to serve because of their steadfastness, their moderation, their good sense, their special proficiency, their esprit de corps; clearly they should help actively in this tremendous conflict for the right. She saw service as necessary for college educated women and believed that the tradition of service was the obligation of Smith alumnae.⁹³ "The men must help drive out the invader; we ask leave to help restore the humble lives so ruthlessly shattered."⁹⁴ College women were given the opportunity to do a patriotic and humane service as well as establish a valuable tradition for the college. Ada Comstock, Dean of Smith College, declared that the Smith College Relief Unit was a pioneer effort for college women to combine training and natural abilities. "There's a big chance for college women now in France."⁹⁵ The alumnae heard the arguments, voted to support the Unit, pledged and delivered funds to back up their votes.

The idea of the women's war service establishing a valuable tradition for the colleges was a strong inducement. The founders of the Smith College

⁹²Ruth Louise Gaines, *Ladies of Grécourt* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1920) 16.

⁹³Gaines, *Ladies of Grécourt*, 12.

⁹⁴Smith College Relief Unit Affiliated With American Fund For French Wounded. Smith College Archives. Northampton, MA.

⁹⁵White, 226-7.

Unit sought to blaze the trail for other colleges and hoped that eventually there might be a service organization for college women similar to that for American college men, though necessarily less dangerous and sacrificial. They noted that they “hoped other women's colleges will form similar units and that eventually a service will grow up as useful in its way as the American Ambulance Service, as creditable to our country and as valuable a tradition to our colleges. We feel that here is an opportunity to create for our college a tradition of public service, a contribution vastly more valuable than any other.”⁹⁶ They immediately appointed a committee to spread the idea to other women's colleges. Eventually, after the Armistice, the Smith College Relief Unit was joined in France by units formed by the women of Barnard, Goucher, Radcliffe, Wellesley, and Vassar Colleges as well as an Intercollegiate Unit supported by colleges unable to fund an entire unit on their own, such as Bryn Mawr and Mount Holyoke Colleges.⁹⁷ Sending relief units after hostilities ended illustrates how women saw their war contribution. Even though the fighting had ended, women's work in aiding the reconstruction of France had not. The Smith Unit was the first and the most celebrated group to undertake war work.

The Unit sailed on the French liner *Rochambeau* from New York on July 29, 1917, and arrived in Paris on August 14. The seventeen volunteers, from the classes of 1888-1914, were led by the first Director, Mrs. Harriet Boyd Hawes. They were selected using detailed application forms. Despite their haste, the War Services Board carefully chose the women workers—as they did the thirty others who joined or followed them. Members of the Unit had

⁹⁶Gaines, *Ladies of Grécourt*, 224

⁹⁷Alice W. Wellington, “Form Letter to Smith College Alumnae,” June 5, 1917, Smith College Archives.

to be at least twenty-five years old and American citizens. They were required to pass a rigid physical examination and provide a certificate of sound nerves and enduring health, readiness for plenty of hard work, sound character and adaptability, ability to speak, read, and write easy French, proficiency either in motor driving (including the ability to make minor repairs) or social service, or training in medicine, nursing or the social services. The War Services Board sought doctors, nurses, dietitians, and experts in the care of children or the infirm, but no amount of special training could qualify a woman who was not naturally level-headed and sympathetic. Members had to supply \$300 for travel and personal expenses; many of them continued to contribute \$55 per month for their own support. They agreed to serve for six months; after their service, members were reappointed, came home, or joined other relief organizations. The War Services Board planned to send two members from the United States each month so that Unit personnel would not be depleted. They voted to give members brief vacations after three months' service.⁹⁸ Forty-five women served in all, sixteen to twenty at a time. As the women prepared to leave the United States, it was the uniforms which caused the most trouble. Everyone had an opinion on how the uniform should be designed. Harriet Boyd Hawes declared that selection of the uniform was "a difficulty which almost wrecked us."⁹⁹ The uniform ended up being "a dark gray, many-pocketed suit and overcoat with soft gray felt hat which each member bought for herself from Abercrombie and Fitch for \$80 and which proved the compatibility of good looks and utility."¹⁰⁰ The women took great pride in their status as professional workers, and having an appropriate

⁹⁸Wellington.

⁹⁹Schneider, 73.

¹⁰⁰Inception of the Smith College Relief Unit.

uniform was very important to them. On the sea journey they practiced their French language skills and provided language instruction to soldiers and other passengers. Upon arriving in Paris they stayed at the Hôtel Voltaire and collected supplies before leaving for their assignment in the Somme on September 11, 1917.

Before leaving New York Mrs. Hawes had arranged for their assignment in the Somme through careful negotiation. It was necessary to work with already established organizations in order to get permits to serve in France and to arrange for supplies. The Smith College women desired to maintain a fair degree of independence. They arranged to go to France under passports issued directly to them as the Smith College Relief Unit and were recognized by the American State Department; they were the only organization which obtained this independence. They worked with the American Fund for French Wounded (AFFW) Civilian Committee to obtain their assignment in France and to arrange for supplies. According to Mrs. A.M. Dike, an American in Paris who served as a temporary intermediary for the Smith College Relief Unit with the French authorities, the AFFW:

Enjoyed completely the confidence of the French government and the love of the French people. It was well-known throughout France; its methods were refreshingly free from red tape as they have been remarkable for their sympathy and tact. Delegates were all women and were given full power to act in all detail work: We have never regretted this system, indeed it is the secret of their success.¹⁰¹

In February 1918, after six months in France, the Smith women changed affiliation to the American Red Cross and had the tremendous resources of

¹⁰¹ Untitled document, Smith College Archives.

that organization available to them. The fundamental principle of the American Red Cross working with refugees in France was to “work through and with all available French agencies rather than to attempt to establish independent service.”¹⁰² Eventually the Smith College Relief Unit was recognized by the French government and served under the aegis of the Service de Santé.¹⁰³ The Unit thus managed to affiliate with a variety of organizations while maintaining its own direction and independence. Mrs. Hawes served as Director of the Unit for only six weeks before going back to the United States on account of illness. Subsequent directors, Alice Tallant '87, Hannah (Dunlop) Andrews '04, Marie Wolfs '00, and Anne Chapin '04 led the unit after Mrs. Hawes left.

Upon arrival in France, in affiliation with the AFFW, the Smith women established the Unit in the Somme region at the small village of Grécourt. The Baronne de Robécourt, the chatelaine of the Chateau de Grécourt, transferred, for the time being, its ‘precarious title’ to the Unit.¹⁰⁴ Grécourt was selected

by the Army and government as the point in greatest need of social service work because of its present state of almost total destitution. It was in the center of richest farming country in France; five million acres of the most fertile land had been controlled by the enemy for two and a half years. All men eighteen to forty-seven years old were at the front. It was a vital transportation link. And destruction and illness ravaged the people.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰²The Work of the American Red Cross During the War (Washington, DC: 1919); 61.

¹⁰³Ruth Louise Gaines, Helping France: The Red Cross in the Devastated Area (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1919): 101.

¹⁰⁴Gaines, Ladies of Grécourt, 25.

¹⁰⁵From unknown, to Harriet Boyd Hawes, August 11, 1917, Correspondence File, Smith College Archives.

When the Germans withdrew in 1917 they carried away or destroyed all they could. Homes, wheat fields, orchards, churches, canals, and schools were ravaged. Able bodied people were taken away as prisoners to work in Germany. Only the very young, the very old, and the sick were left to rebuild their homes while under the occupation of the French and British armies.¹⁰⁶ The arrival of the Smith College women in September of 1917 was another in a long line of war visitors and occupations.

Grécourt was seventy-five miles northeast of Paris. It was in the war zone and the Smith women could hear explosions and at night see flashes of artillery.¹⁰⁷ When they first arrived the area was under the control of the French Army; later the British forces and still later the American forces took over. The area the Smith College Relief Unit was responsible for consisted of sixteen villages (Aubigny, Bacquencourt, Breuil, Brouchy, Buverchy, Canisy, Douilly, Eppeville, Esmerly-Hallon, Grécourt, Hombleux, Muille-Villette, Offey, Sancourt, Verlaines, and Vilette) and approximately two thousand French peasants who had stayed during the German occupation or returned after the German retreat. The first official act of the Unit was the celebration of St. Matthew's day on September 21. For over seven centuries St. Matthew had been the patron saint of Grécourt; this was the first time in three years that the fête was celebrated.

The college women quickly got down to their self-assigned task. They treated the French villagers much as the settlement house workers had treated American immigrants. Although the villages were devastated, the villagers were formerly prosperous, and the college women recognized that the French

¹⁰⁶Gaines, *Ladies of Grécourt*, 58.

¹⁰⁷Helene M. Sillia, *Lest We Forget: A History of Women's Overseas Service League* (The Women's Overseas Service League, 1978): 242

peasants were different from the slum dwellers whom settlement workers dealt with stateside. They compared the thriftiness of the peasants to that of American Yankees.¹⁰⁸ They conducted a social survey, with the assistance of the local mayors, to investigate family income and needs. The population was seventy percent of the pre-war population. Most of the villagers were old, feeble, or children; half of the villagers were under fifteen years old. The Smith women attempted to bring a sense of community to an area which had literally been devastated.

The work of the Smith Unit fell into five main divisions: public health, stores and supplies, farming, transportation, and social service proper which was subdivided into visiting, sewing, and child-welfare.¹⁰⁹ They expected the villagers to pay for what they could and provided at nominal charge or free items the villagers were unable to afford to purchase. This was the general policy of the American Red Cross and followed the tenets of the settlement workers in that it distinguished between reform and charity. Reformers saw themselves as having faith in the people they were serving and trying to change the system; charity would be providing the service without the expectation that people would be able to change. The goal was to assist the peasants, not pauperize them. The Smith women were there to help the peasants to help themselves.¹¹⁰ The peasants had money from savings, from government allocations, and credits against future reparations. The Unit's medical service was the only health care available for civilians. The college women supplied medicine, combs, toothbrushes, as well as such foodstuffs as eggs and milk, and beds, stoves, and assorted furniture. They operated a

¹⁰⁸Gaines, *Ladies of Grécourt*, 193.

¹⁰⁹Gaines, *Ladies of Grécourt*, 66.

¹¹⁰Gaines, *Ladies of Grécourt*, 71.

rolling store which they took along a regular route from village to village. Their job was to stimulate the reestablishment of normal communal life. They reintroduced French games, organized clubs for children (sewing for girls and carpentry for boys) and refurbished schools. They provided farmers with seeds and arranged for the land to be plowed. They opened the first library ever in the area. They took to heart the admonition Dean Ada Comstock had given at their farewell luncheon in New York to “render a terrible wilderness a place of honor and fruitfulness.”¹¹¹ They insinuated themselves into the very fabric of the villages, were affectionately nicknamed ‘les Dames de Grécourt,’ and did their work with smiles, laughter, and jokes.¹¹² Determined and resourceful, they characterized their ability to undertake their work as “one of those never-defined assets of a college education!”¹¹³

By the spring of 1918 they had made marked progress in their efforts to rehabilitate the villages. Then suddenly, on Thursday, March 21, 1918, the Germans began a new offensive, and the Smith College women and their villages found themselves in the battle zone. The Smith women became celebrated throughout France and the United States for their efforts to evacuate the villages. They successfully moved all the villagers as well as thousands of evacuees from throughout the area beyond the firing range. They worked under shell fire and literally directed military traffic as they evacuated alongside the British forces. All their equipment was lost, but they did manage to evacuate their cows and maintain a supply of scarce and precious milk. Their efforts were commended by an American Red Cross official who stated, “We have believed for a long time that American college

¹¹¹ “The Beginning of the End or the End of the Beginning.”

¹¹² Gaines, *Ladies of Grécourt*, 130.

¹¹³ White, 226-7.

girls were equal to any emergency. We have never had a finer example of their courage and ingenuity than that which this small band of Smith girls has given us."¹¹⁴ After the evacuation their relief work was suspended, and they proceeded to work in American hospitals and canteens and make themselves useful to the American Red Cross and the American Army. An American brigadier general at field headquarters at Chateau-Thierry requested "another sixty of those Smith College girls. 'Forty not enough, want a hundred,' but there were no more than sixteen!"¹¹⁵ They had clearly achieved their objective of defining a useful role for themselves in a world at war.

The Smith College women were determined to return to their villages after the war, and they did return in January 1919, after the Armistice and under the direction of the French government. They began anew to reconstruct village life; all had been devastated again in the final German offensive. In addition to resuming their prior activities they began some new initiatives now that they were certain their efforts could last. They undertook trailblazing public health work that was adopted throughout rural France. They were determined to establish firmly the principles of public health, welfare, and community work so that at the proper time they could be turned over to some French organization. They reestablished the first free, public, circulating library as well as five new libraries and a rolling library that traveled to the smaller villages. The library was funded by donations in memory of Elizabeth Russell '03 who died at sea on her way to join the Unit. The library eventually grew to two thousand volumes.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴Gaines, *Ladies of Grécourt*, 112.

¹¹⁵Edward Hungerford, *With The Doughboy in France* (New York: Macmillan, 1920): 142.

¹¹⁶"Brief History of the Smith College Relief Unit", typed manuscript, Smith College Archives, n.p.

The Unit originally intended to complete its services by summer. But at that time the Director, Marie Wolfs, notified the Smith College War Services Board that the Unit must stay if it was to fulfill its self-imposed obligation to lay a firm foundation for the future well-being and prosperity of the community. On behalf of the Unit, Wolfs cabled the War Services Board that "they were urged by the French to stay on. Needs appalling for months to come. Making real progress but are only at the beginning. Cannot leave in face of such emergency."¹¹⁷ The Unit stayed. The fact that the Unit wanted to continue their work and that the college alumnae funded the continued presence in the Somme is indicative of the college women's notion that its service was instrumental and valuable. They extended their contribution beyond that of a wartime temporary measure and made it into a continual, social service effort. It fit into the notion of the women in settlements moving into the cities in an effort to make a long-term, substantial contribution.

Their efforts to build for peace led them back to the settlement house theme. They established a 'Maison pour Tous,' a community center on the American settlement house model. It welcomed all people and had services ranging from a library, a nurse, a dispensary, a cinema, and a gymnasium, to Boy Scouts, and anything else that could foster the community development. The Smith College women left Grécourt in April 1920 when they turned the Maison pour Tous over to the Secours d'Urgence with a two year subsidy. In August 1922 the Maison pour Tous was deeded to the Bureau de Bienfaisance and the Commune of Hombleux with a five year subsidy from the Smith College War Services Board. This transfer officially ended the work of the Smith College women in the Somme. They returned to celebrate their

¹¹⁷ "Brief History of the Smith College Relief Unit."

donation of a new bell for the church at Grécourt in July 1923. Marie Wolfs was 'marraine' or godmother to the bell. In 1927, at the end of the five year subsidy, the permanent structure for the Maison pour Tous was built. The management of the Maison pour Tous was assessed, determined successful, and the War Services Board pledged support for as long as funds held out. Smith College maintained a connection with Grécourt until 1950.

During the years a total of eighty-three Smith College alumnae served overseas under the aegis of the Alumnae Association, which, through its War Service Board, collected \$251,093.92.¹¹⁸ Through their relief work in France the Smith College women successfully combined their sense of themselves as destined to provide service with their determination to serve as role models of suitable activity for educated women. They undertook their work with a serious intent to have a positive impact on the French villagers, and in providing services such as health care and community structures such as the Maison pour Tous, they managed to leave a long lasting imprint on the small villages in northern France.

¹¹⁸Inception of the Smith College Relief Unit.

CONCLUSION

At the top of a hill, the highest point in the small city of Northampton, Massachusetts, sits a set of wrought iron gates at the entrance to Smith College. These are the Grécourt Gates which commemorate the participation of Smith College women, both students and alumnae, in war activities during the First World War. In commemorating the college women's war work, particular honor was given to the women who represented the college in France working for the Smith College Relief Unit. The gates were commissioned by the Board of Trustees of the College and forged in France. They are replicas of the gates of the Chateau Robécourt in Grécourt, France. They were dedicated at a college-wide ceremony on October 18, 1924; guests included French representatives and local and state dignitaries. Thirty-two Smith College alumnae, wearing their uniforms of service, sat on the platform of John M. Green Hall along with the flags of the United States, the Republic of France, and the Alumnae Association of Smith College. William Allan Neilson, then president of the college, addressed the assemblage: "Undergraduates of Smith College, these are your veterans. This is your Grand Army of the Republic. These are the women who in the field of international relations have shown you the way to be worthy of your tradition." After the ceremony the undergraduates, dressed in white, formed an honor guard and led the procession as it marched across campus in the brilliant October sunshine to the gates. Ada Comstock, alumna, alumna trustee, former Dean of the College, and later president of Radcliffe College,

presented the gates to the college. Harriet Boyd Hawes '92, the founder and first director of the Smith College Relief Unit and Marie Wolfs '00, another leading force in the Unit and former director, flung the gates wide open.¹¹⁹

The dedication of the gates left a visible reminder of the work of the Smith College women. Vassar College likewise honored the Vassar Training Camp for nurses with the Mills Gate. Local authorities throughout France gave medals to college women who served their communities; the archives of all of the colleges are filled with these medals, scrolls, letters, commendations, books, pamphlets, and news clippings commemorating the work of college women in World War One. All these physical commemorations note the value of the work the women did and, since the projects undertaken were groundbreaking efforts, speak to the novelty of college women and war service.

The influence of the work is evidenced beyond the physical commemorations. In becoming involved in war activity and forging a role for themselves, college women reinforced their value to society in general. Any group of people who could provide such valuable service in wartime could likewise provide service in times of peace. Obviously, the French peasants whose villages were reconstructed by the various college relief units were affected by the college women. The very act of war service by women was expanded in World War Two when the women's colleges were used by the military to train women soldiers and sailors. Women were then incorporated directly into the military establishment, whereas the very few women who served in the military in World War One were placed in affiliated units and denied recognition (including pensions) for their contributions. By forging a

¹¹⁹"Brief History of the Smith College Relief Unit."

role for college women in the first war, the participants from the women's colleges ensured that college women were no longer a novelty thereafter. Women proved that they had a valid contribution to make in the war effort.

Through their service in World War One, college women were consciously developing a new role for women in society. They took pride in their efforts, and their activities were heralded throughout the country in the national press. They tried to develop models of activity that could be used over the long-term. The war changed the world; with their war service they sought action whereby they could make a positive contribution to the improvement of the small part of the war that they directly affected and to show that college women had valid contributions to offer during war. Their legacy is more than the gates, plaques, medals, and letters commemorating their actions. They changed the way women were viewed and developed a role for women where there had not been one before. As Ada Comstock foretold, college women found for themselves "a place of honor and fruitfulness."¹²⁰

¹²⁰"The Beginning of the End or the End of the Beginning."

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