Swarthmore College

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Christopher Densmore
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Swarthmore College

Christopher Densmore

THE ORIGINS OF SWARTHMORE COLLEGE

Swarthmore College, chartered in 1864 and opened for instruction in 1869, was founded by members of the Hicksite branch of the Religious Society of Friends from Philadelphia, New York, and Baltimore yearly meetings. The concern for establishing a "Friends Boarding School" to supply qualified teachers for local Quaker schools began in the early 1850s in Baltimore Yearly Meeting. In 1854, the Committee on Education reported to Baltimore Yearly Meeting its plan for a boarding school "where such of our youth of both sexes, as may need it and desire it, may receive a liberal education under the care of society; where Teachers can be Educated, and properly prepared to take charge of Schools in Friends' neighborhoods; and where Orphan Children, and others whose circumstances require them to be sent from home to School, can receive a guarded education, and at a moderate expense." The committee hoped to cooperate with Friends from New York and Philadelphia yearly meetings. It was a good start, but the concern languished until October 1860, when the proposal was reintroduced at a meeting held at the home of Martha and Nathan Tyson in Baltimore, Maryland. Early in 1861, an *Address to Some Members of the Religious Society of Friends to their Fellow Members on the Subject of Education and on the Establishment of a Boarding School for Friends' Children and for the Education of Teachers*, written largely by Quaker educator Benjamin Hallowell, as well as articles in the *Friends Intelligencer*, publicized the need for the school. The school was to teach the liberal arts and natural sciences, be concerned with the moral development of the

students, and be coeducational, and students would be expected to conform to Quaker standards of dress and behavior. It would, in Quaker terms, provide a "guarded education" where Quakers could be nurtured and trained in an atmosphere where their beliefs and practices were understood and would not have to be confronted or tempted by the "worldly" colleges of the day. Haverford College, under the control of Orthodox Friends, was not then considered an option by Hicksite Quakers.

In October 1862, the Friends Educational Association was created to carry on the work of establishing the school. Its board of managers consisted of sixteen members of each sex. The equal involvement of men and women in the management of the school, an extension of Quaker meeting practices, was radical at the time, and after the college was chartered, the State of Pennsylvania had to pass special legislation to recognize the authority of women on the board of managers. The members of the board of managers had to be members of the Society of Friends, a requirement that was continued at Swarthmore College until 1908. Although the Friends Educational Association and its board of managers were drawn from Baltimore, Philadelphia, and New York yearly meetings and the donors to the endeavor were Friends, the Educational Association (and later Swarthmore College) was never directly under the control of a yearly meeting.

SWARTHMORE COLLEGE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The college, named after Swarthmoor Hall in England, the refuge and later home of Quaker founder George Fox and Margaret Fell Fox, was chartered on May 4, 1864. The college purchased land in Springfield Township, Delaware County, Pennsylvania, a rural situation west of Philadelphia, and in 1866 the cornerstone of the main college building, later renamed Parrish Hall after Swarthmore founder and first president Edward Parrish, was laid. It took an additional three years, until 1869, for Swarthmore to obtain sufficient funding to begin operations. At the inaugural ceremonies, two oaks were planted near the college hall in honor of James and Lucretia Mott, the noted Quaker abolitionists and women's rights activists, whose lives were held up as a model to the students of the new school.

In the beginning, Swarthmore's preparative department was larger than the college. When Swarthmore opened for instruction in 1869 with 199 students, only twenty-six were qualified for entrance in the freshman class of the college; the remainder took classes in the preparative department. A decade later, enrollment in the preparatory department and the college were roughly similar. The preparatory department was ended in

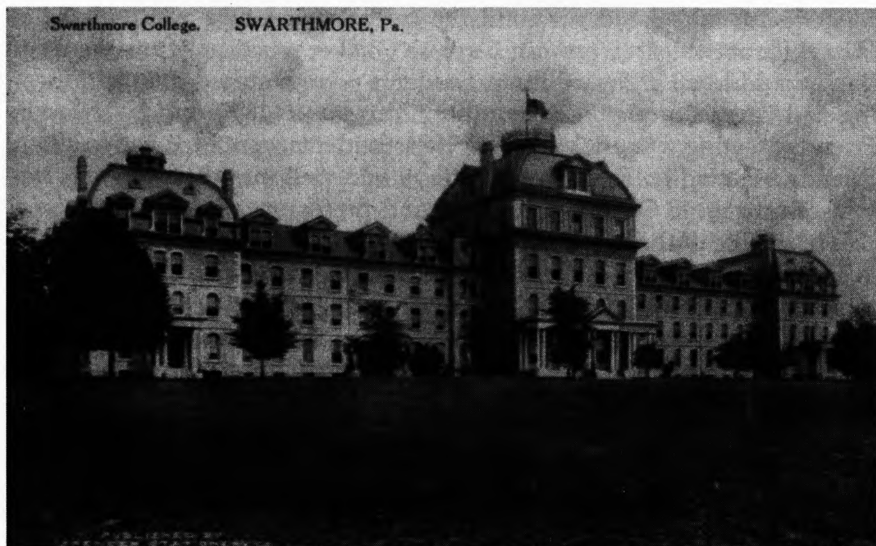

Figure 4.1. . Parrish Hall, Swarthmore College, ca. 1900

1892, after the academic strengthening of Quaker and non-Quaker secondary schools assured Swarthmore an adequate population of students ready to attend college.

The founders of Swarthmore and its early presidents (Edward Parrish, 1869–1871, and Edward Magill, 1872–1884) were prepared to be flexible about the curriculum and practices of the new institution. The approach was pragmatic: no one was quite sure what Quaker higher education, at least in its Hicksite manifestation, should be. The reports of the board of managers and the college catalogs of the early years of the college represent changing attitudes toward the value of the sciences, mathematics, and languages and in modes of teaching and in electives.

In one respect, Swarthmore was radical, at least among colleges in the East, and that was in coeducation. The board of managers was equally divided between men and women, women held professorships in the college, and men and women learned and ate together. The mingling of the sexes in the classroom did not extend to student social life. Interaction between male and female students was closely and carefully regulated well into the twentieth century. President Magill was particularly vocal in his support of female education. His daughter, Helen, was a member of the first graduating class of Swarthmore in 1873 and the first woman to earn a PhD in the United States.

Swarthmore was clearly a Quaker institution, though even in the nineteenth century many students were not members of the Society of Friends.

Most non-Quaker students until the twentieth century were related to Friends or at the least were familiar with Quaker practices. If any were not, they would learn at Swarthmore. Students were required to attend meeting daily. A meetinghouse was built on campus in 1879, and Swarthmore Friends Meeting was established in 1894. Students were expected to attend Friends Meeting on First-Day (Sunday), and well into the twentieth century, Swarthmore College presidents and professors played a prominent role in the life of the meeting.

The initial intention of the founders of Swarthmore to establish a school to prepare teachers for other Quaker schools was partially realized in the nineteenth century, but Swarthmore had a much greater impact on the Society of Friends. The pages of the *Friends Intelligencer*, the organ of the Hicksite branch of the Society of Friends, regularly carried news of Swarthmore College well into the twentieth century. Commencements and annual reports of the board of managers were Quaker news. Hicksite Friends took an interest in and commented on the successes and failures of the college. In addition to educating generations of Quakers, Swarthmore provided a home for influential Friends. Elizabeth Powell Bond,

Figure 4.2. Swarthmore Students Walking to Swarthmore Friends Meetinghouse, ca. 1900

dean of women, was a well-known Quaker writer. Jesse Herman Holmes represented a liberal and socially conscious brand of Quakerism. Swarthmore College presidents were welcome speakers at Quaker meetings and at Friends General Conference, and their writings, even on purely educational topics, could find a place in the *Intelligencer*.

Friends Historical Library, originally the Anson Lapham Repository, was established in 1871, and the Jenkins professorship of Quaker history and research was established in 1924. The Swarthmore College Peace Collection began in the 1930s. Several prominent Quaker historians have been associated with the college, William I. Hull, Frederick Tolles, and J. William Frost among them.

STUDENT LIFE AND ATHLETICS AT SWARTHMORE

Student life at Swarthmore, aside from a heavy dose of *in loco parentis* to guide students against unseemly behavior and any unregulated social mixing of the sexes, was not unlike other colleges of the time. Students could join one of several literary societies, the first established in 1871; write for the college newspaper, *The Phoenix*, established in 1882; or, in the case of men, play intercollegiate football and participate in track and field. Despite the early Quaker aversion to music, by the end of the century Swarthmore students had organized an orchestra club, mandolin club, and glee club. Fraternities for men came in the 1880s and are still part of student life at Swarthmore, though the two remaining fraternities attract less than 10 percent of the male students. Sororities for female students came in 1891 but were voted out by the women students in 1933. A majority of the women in sororities supported the move to terminate the sorority system at Swarthmore.

Football, a feature on the Swarthmore Campus since 1878, was controversial in the opening years of the twentieth century and not just at Swarthmore. Many felt that intercollegiate football was becoming too professional and too violent and not in keeping with educational purposes of higher education. In the midst of this controversy, Swarthmore gained national notoriety when a photograph of Robert (Tiny) Maxwell, bloodied in the Swarthmore–University of Pennsylvania football game of 1905, was reprinted in newspapers nationwide. It was not just Quakers who wondered whether intercollegiate football belonged on a college campus. The issue was brought to a head in 1907, when the will of Anna T. Jeanes left coal lands, reportedly worth from $1 million to $3 million, to Swarthmore College on the condition that it end football. The question of whether Swarthmore should accept the gift received national attention in the newspapers. Quakers, at least those writing to the *Friends Intelligencer*,

were in favor of accepting the gift and getting rid of intercollegiate football. The board of managers rejected the bequest, and President Joseph Swain explained the reasoning in a lengthy article, "Conditional Endowments," in the *Intelligencer*. The specific issue of football was beside the point, and there was reason for rethinking its place on the college campus. Swain expressed openness to the idea of ending football as an experiment. What Swain and Swarthmore College were unwilling to do was to accept conditions that bound the college to a course of action for all time. The college had to have the independence and the flexibility to decide to change according to its own best thinking at the time.

Swarthmore College deliberately stepped back from emphasis on intercollegiate competition. In reviewing his tenure as president in 1939, Frank Adylotte (president 1921–1940) summed up the changed attitude of the college, saying, "We have entered frankly upon a policy of playing games for fun." The success of the new athletic idea was that 60 to 70 percent of both men and women students participated in some intercollegiate athletic contest rather than settling for "the inferior activity of watching games from a grandstand." Intercollegiate football was eliminated by the action of the board of managers in 2000, a decision that was controversial among alumni and others. Those opposed to the board of managers' decisions questioned whether the action was in keeping with Quaker principles of consensus and deliberation. A group opposed to the decision took as its name "Mind the Light."

SWARTHMORE'S CHANGING RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SOCIETY OF FRIENDS

Until 1908, the board of managers of Swarthmore College was limited to members of the Religious Society of Friends. The requirement was dropped not from any sense of a changed mission of the college but for pragmatic, financial reasons. In order for the college faculty to participate in the Carnegie Foundation's retirement system, Swarthmore was required to be nonsectarian. The board acquiesced, reporting in 1908 that "the denominational restriction referred to is not needed; that the college will be as absolutely under the management of Friends without the clause as with it." At the same time, the board claimed that Swarthmore had been founded "as a protest against sectarianism." Clearly, there were differing conceptions of what constituted a sectarian institution. For the board and the college, the fact that the college was not under the direct meeting control of the Society of Friends and that it was open to non-Quakers meant that it was nonsectarian.

Swarthmore College was the sole Hicksite Quaker institution of higher learning in North America. Other Quaker colleges, including Haverford, only a few miles away, were securely under Orthodox control. The divide between Hicksite and Orthodox Friends diminished over time. In Philadelphia and New York yearly meetings, the bodies most closely connected to Swarthmore and its students, there were signs of growing cooperation between the two branches in the late nineteenth century and a slow process of reunification of Hicksite and Orthodox in the first half of the twentieth.

SWARTHMORE IN THE WORLD WARS

Friends had a long-standing testimony against participating in the military, but that testimony had severely eroded by the entrance of the United States into World War I in 1917. Swarthmore students, apparently including many Quakers, requested military training opportunities on campus. What was a Quaker College to do? In May 1918, the board of managers rejected the student request for training, pointing to Friends' historic testimonies and the positive need for men of technical and administrative capacity in the war and the peace to follow, but also wished "Godspeed to all in the path of their conscientious convictions." This "Godspeed" was intended to include those whose path included military service, though that path would not be open at Swarthmore. The situation changed over the summer, and it appeared that male students would be faced with the alternative of being drafted or remaining in college under a military training program. Swarthmore College, after polling benefactors of the college and parents of students, who overwhelmingly asked for military training, contracted with the government to create a Student Army Training Corp (SATC) unit at Swarthmore. Swarthmore's brief experience with a militarized campus ended in December 1918, as the end of the war ended the necessity for SATC.

Swarthmore College policy during World War II was more deliberate. The United States was mobilizing its manpower resources, and able-bodied college-aged males would be in military service, in war industries, or, for Quaker and other conscientious objectors, in Civilian Public Service work. In his 1942 annual report, Swarthmore College President John Nason, himself a Quaker, wrote, "I feel bound to recommend a policy . . . which will enable us to do positive good rather than merely refrain from evil." Swarthmore College's contribution was to educate people for a world at peace. Swarthmore was to provide a quality education for trainees in the Navy's V-12 program and for men preparing for alternative service in

Civilian Public Service. The V-12 program at Swarthmore included a contingent of Chinese naval officers. John Nason also chaired the National Japanese-American Student Relocation Council, which placed Japanese American students in colleges and universities rather than internment camps. Swarthmore College during World War II thus included on the same campus pacifist conscientious objectors, Chinese naval officers, and Japanese American students. The ready acceptance by the college and the board of managers of military training at Swarthmore was a break from the historic Quaker peace testimony. For mid-twentieth-century Swarthmore, the goal of education, understood as being based on Quaker educational values, was to prepare intellectually aware and socially conscious students. The choices that such students made about the nature of their careers and service were a matter for their individual consciences.

A TRADITION OF ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE

Swarthmore College at the beginning of the twenty-first century is regarded as one of the top residential liberal arts colleges in the United States. The institution has come a long way from its opening in 1869, when it could find only six people prepared to enter the college course. When Swarthmore began its rise to academic excellence is a matter of some debate. It is true that just as all institutions of higher education claim distinctiveness, all presidents of colleges and universities claim to be striving for excellence. The desire to improve academics at Swarthmore and to improve the quality of students applying to the college is a theme running through the reports of the presidents and the board of managers from 1869 on. One aspect that may set Swarthmore apart from many colleges was the willingness of the administration to continually reexamine and redirect educational objectives. Aside from the desire to remain a small, residential and liberal arts college, everything else in the college curriculum seems open to reexamination in each generation.

In the nineteenth century, the concern for improvement of the student body was linked to the concern for Friends' secondary education. Friends' secondary schools needed to prepare students who were able to take advantage of the college offerings at Swarthmore. The 1884–1885 *Catalogue* listed nine schools, all Friends' schools, and all in Pennsylvania, Delaware, New York, and New Jersey, whose students would be admitted to the college without examination on a written certificate of the school principal. As the number of qualified secondary schools rose, including by the end of the century non-Quaker public high schools, the potential body of applicants rose. Swarthmore also attempted to increase its geo-

graphical base, marketing itself to Hicksite Friends throughout the United States and Canada. Slowly, the numbers of people who wanted to attend Swarthmore rose. Swarthmore College presidents of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries did their best to make the college attractive to both the superior student and the best faculty by increasing the college endowment and its physical plant and providing scholarships for students and competitive salaries for the faculty.

The annual reports produced during the administration of Joseph Swain (president 1902–1921) reflect the growing professionalism of American higher education in the first part of the twentieth century. Statistics on students provided a benchmark for college progress, and reports on faculty publications emphasized the desire for faculty who engaged in research. At the same time, Swarthmore emphasized that it did not intend to compete with large public and private research universities with their large class sizes. Smallness was a virtue not for a guarded education of young Quakers but for a close working relationship between professor and student.

The college honors program was instituted at the beginning of the administration of Frank Aydelotte (1921–1940) and increased Swarthmore's national reputation as a distinctive college. One longtime faculty member, writing in 1973, went so far as to call the honors program "the principal mechanism by which excellence has been achieved, and over the years sustained." Swarthmore continued to think of itself as a Quaker school, but where the majority of the students of the nineteenth-century institution were drawn from Quakers or Quaker-related communities largely in southeastern Pennsylvania and almost exclusively from the mid-Atlantic, Swarthmore was, by the 1930s, a national college and saw institutions like Oberlin College in Ohio or Carleton College in Minnesota as its peers. The Quaker focus of old Swarthmore was not rejected but lessened in priorities. The "Quaker" heritage of the college was increasingly understood as a set of educational values that could prepare the superior student for multiple activities. As selectivity and enrollments grew and as Friends declined nationally as a proportion of the population, the numbers of actual members of the Society of Friends attending Swarthmore declined.

SWARTHMORE AND RACIAL DIVERSITY

In its origins, Swarthmore was a protected environment for Friends, a group with distinctive beliefs and practices that were not always welcome in the existing institutions of higher learning. Despite the antislavery credentials and specific concern of a number of Swarthmore's founders and early presidents for African American education, no African Americans

attended the institution until 1943. The de facto racial segregation of Swarthmore seems paradoxical to modern sensibilities.

The opening of Swarthmore to a racially diverse student body should be seen as part of a reexamination of racial attitudes among Americans generally and Quakers particularly in the 1920s and 1930s. The Race Relations Committee of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, the Friends Council on Education, and other Quaker organizations were actively questioning whether Friends' racial attitudes were in keeping with Quaker testimonies. Swarthmore students also pushed the administration and board of managers by petitions and editorials in *The Phoenix* to open the college to African Americans. The board of mangers finally responded in 1943, issuing a statement that race, color, or creed did not limit admissions to Swarthmore, and the first two African American women students entered that year. Later, black students came as part of the V-12 program.

The removal of paper barriers to admission in 1943 resulted in a small number of African American students. The issue of attempting to be more positive in admitting black students was raised in the 1940s and later. In 1968 and 1969, colleges in general were grappling with questions of race, diversity, and the obligations of institutions of higher education to solve social problems. These issues, already under discussion among the administration, faculty, and students, reached a climax late in 1969 when members of the African American Students Society occupied the admissions office. The discussions of the 1960s and the crisis of 1969 resulted in a reexamination of the college's role in supporting and fostering diversity among the students and faculty. In 1970, the Black Cultural Center was established and later the Women's Center and Intercultural Center. Diversity, in 1869, meant establishing a college where the needs of Friends could be accommodated. In 1943, it meant eliminating former barriers so that all qualified students could attend Swarthmore. In 1969 and 1970, the college was called to actively cultivate diversity as a positive good, with an educational benefit to the college. As of the fall of 2005, students of color, either citizens or permanent residents of the United States, made up 33 percent of the student body. This includes Asian American (15.3 percent), Latino/a (9.5 percent), African American (6.9 percent), Native American (0.7 percent), and multiracial (0.4 percent).

SWARTHMORE'S EDUCATIONAL MISSION

Contemporary Swarthmore College remains an intentionally small, residential, liberal arts college. The enrollment, as of the fall of 2005, was 1,479 (711 men and 768 women) with 163 members of the faculty full-time. More than 90 percent (92.6 percent) of the students come from the United States

and its territories, with the remaining students coming from thirty-eight foreign countries. Members of the Society of Friends are a small minority among the student population, though the college gives special consideration to Friends and to children of alumni. The institution is committed to academic excellence. The Quaker origins are part of the traditions of the institution, and the deliberations of the college's board of managers and the faculty reflect an understanding of Quaker procedure. The *College Catalog* makes note of Swarthmore's religious tradition, though expressed as educational and social objectives:

> Swarthmore College was founded by members of the Religious Society of Friends (the Quakers). Although it has been nonsectarian since 1908, and although Friends now compose a small minority of the student body, the College still values highly many of the principles of that Society. Foremost among these principles is the individual's responsibility for seeking and applying truth and for testing whatever truth one believes one has found. As a way of life, Quakerism emphasizes hard work, simple living, and a generous giving, as well as personal integrity, social justice, and the peaceful settlement of disputes. The College does not seek to impose on its students this Quaker view of life or any other specific set of convictions about the nature of things and the duties of human beings. It does, however, encourage ethical and religious concern about such matters and continuing examination of any view that may be held regarding them.

A case statement, *The Meaning of Swarthmore,* prepared for the current (2001–2006) development campaign, emphasizes the twin themes of high intellectual achievement and social values. Personal growth, ethical consciousness, and social commitment are stressed. The document, focusing on the future rather than the past, makes no reference to the Society of Friends or to Quakerism apart from a reference to "the inner light in everyone" that refers to personal potential rather than divine guidance. Considered against the intentions of the founders to create a Quaker institution to serve the Society of Friends, modern Swarthmore might be judged to have become an almost entirely secular and non-Quaker institution. However, much of the language of this document would likely appeal to the liberal Quakers who organized and led the college for most of its history.

One of the speakers at the inaugural celebration of Swarthmore College in 1869 was John D. Hicks of New York. His formulation of the goals of Swarthmore, though expressed in religious terms, is not so different from those stated in the *College Catalog* in 2005. Hicks said,

> We have no creed, no confession of faith, no formalism in worship. We propose, so far as is practicable, to influence the students in the general principles

> of well-doing; that each individual is sovereign in his responsibility to the higher law of his creator, manifested in his own heart, from the dictates of which spring all the Christian virtues. . . .
>
> This claim is too broad for sectarianism. . . . We will endeavor to establish principles and leave the applications to individual minds, knowing well that in their application they must need assume a diversity of form.

Swarthmore College began as a guarded education for Friends and for the benefit of Friends and the improvement of Quaker education generally. By the twentieth century, it was well on its way toward becoming a nonsectarian institution, but one with educational principles based on a secular vision, articulated by successive presidents and faculty, of a quality education growing out of Friends' principles. Somewhere in the twentieth century, Swarthmore passed a point of transition where a Quaker college became a college founded by members of the Society of Friends. Nineteenth-century Swarthmore had an impact on and largely within the Society of Friends. The impact of twentieth- and now twenty-first-century Swarthmore is far broader.

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