A Tale of Two Colleges: Bates & Trinity, 1890–1930

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by Brent Bette, student curator

The Watkinson Library
Trinity College·Hartford
It began innocently enough, as does any serious collection. After enrolling in a historiography class on Bates College history I began perusing eBay wondering what, exactly, existed in the way of ephemera related to the college. I found yearbooks, postcards, and even some movie memorabilia related to Cathy Bates, but nothing of substance. Of course, this was my first true exploration of historical memorabilia online. I had yet to learn, much like fishing, that you need to be patient and continue to cast your line. The moment came in January of 2007, when a journal, written by a Bates student between August 1892 and April 1893, came up for bid. Somewhat naively, I put my bid in at ten dollars—which held for a few days. But as the end of the auction loomed an incredible bidding war began. I was ultimately victorious, but not without some financial bumps and bruises, especially for a poor college kid. When it arrived in the mail it was as if Christmas had come eleven months early. I gently opened its century-old pages and began to read. It was at this moment I realized the art (and frustration) of reading cursive writing. I plodded along, reading each entry with great interest, hoping to get a sense of nostalgia for a simpler time. However, what I found made me laugh. The college experience, particularly at Bates, had not changed all that much. Wesley Page, the writer of the journal, Class of 1894, was a typical nineteen year-old. He procrastinated, had crushes on girls, and was unsure what the future would hold. In fact, it was with the vindication of a New Year’s resolution that he began keeping a journal. Unfortunately for us, the noble experiment lasted only about nine months. However, even in this short time, the legacy and historical perspective he left us was priceless. Certainly we could piece together the “19th century college experience” through alumni records, yearbooks and newspaper clippings but here were the day-to-day thoughts and feelings of a student. This journal offered one man’s specific emotions and feelings of the
time. It was, for all intents and purposes, like a screen shot of a modern day Facebook page, only better.

The journal wetted my historical pallet. My desire for a more complete story of him focused my attention on items I once saw as marginal. The 1894 graduation program was now more than just “interesting.” The set of late 19th century college newspapers were worth pursuing if for no other reason than to find a story about the author of the journal. Perhaps a poem Mr. Page wrote or an editorial about a recent campus-wide debate. Anything, however minor, that would place another piece of the puzzle. What this drive has yielded is a collection (as of this writing) of some ninety-pieces, including scrapbooks, acceptance letters and even a series of love letters.

My typical routine became a thorough examination of purchases as they arrived in the mail, then placement in a box which would then be placed in a closet for safekeeping. My hope is to write some sort of early Bates history or at the very least donate the collection to the college archives. Not only does this exhibition allow me to realize at least a part of that dream (perhaps its first stage), but it also has allowed me an opportunity to compare two similar institutions to get a deeper sense of the liberal arts college experience during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Although sharing a friendly, present-day rivalry, Bates and Trinity College have more commonalities than differences. Trinity was founded in 1823 as Washington College. Bates was founded in 1855 as Maine State Seminary. Both had similar growing pains which, at times, made the survivability of each institution questionable. Unlike today, the colleges did not enjoy the prestige or notoriety which has afforded them the title of “Top Liberal Arts Colleges” by entities such as U.S. News and World Reports. Each fledgling institution was subject to the economic ebbs and flows of the late 19th century and struggled to keep their dormitories and classrooms filled. If not for determined leadership in the persons of President Charles W. Bowman (Trinity) and President George C. Chase (Bates), who revitalized their respective institutions, there is an excellent chance the schools would not exist today. However, the goal of this exhibition is not to delve deeply into the politics of each college but rather take a “bottom up” approach, viewing each college from arguably the most important perspective of all—the student. It is through this view that we are afforded a window into the interesting day-to-day lives of the late 19th and early 20th college student. We can also deduce the priorities, both academic and extracurricular, of each institution. After all, it is the student who makes the college.

Much of this story is derived from journals, letters, and even dance cards which allow a rare view into the daily life of a typical college student from the 1890s to 1930s. We often think of the early 20th century with a great deal of nostalgia and even yearning. Compared to the constant communication and open-book lives of most adolescents today, we reflect on how simple the lives of college students must have been “back in the day.” However, what becomes more clear with each new source is how complicated and in many ways similar the lives of these students were in relation to those currently enrolled. Yes, letters have been replaced by emails, calling cards with Facebook postings, and paper report cards with virtual ones but the themes are still the same.

Our story begins in Lewiston, Maine with a young man by the name of Wesley Eugene Page. Wesley, nicknamed “Bubble” for his upbeat personality, was originally from Brownville, Maine and was a member of the class of 1894. Perhaps due to the Panic of 1893, only he and twenty-two others received their diplomas that year, making it the lowest graduate to non-graduate ratio of the era. The June 1894 edition of the Student notes, “deep regret

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Graduate to Non-Graduate Ratio, 1891–1897
is expressed at the loss” of so many classmates. Chaplain of his class, Mr. Page was a high achieving student who received first honors in psychology and was selected to deliver a commencement speech which he titled, “The Genesis of Pessimism.”

Although it is likely that a few of Wesley’s classmates kept some form of diary or journal, as far as I know only his has survived. Albeit brief (he only kept from August 18, 1892 to April 10, 1893), the day-to-day update on his classes, leisure activities, and his general intellectual ponderings are invaluable in recreating the student experience, especially as a means of comparison to other periods. For instance, on Saturday, September 10, 1892, he notes, “Played tennis this A.M. Did very little work and went to bed early.” Clearly, procrastination is not a new phenomenon for college students. In one of the most interesting entries he questions his spiritual discipline: “I have been too conservative in regard to my Christian life.” Throughout the nine months he kept the journal we see the typical ebbs and flows of his interest and devotion to his courses. Some of his “recitations” went well, while others did not.

Also apparent in his writings were the strong personalities of his professors, a hallmark of both institutions even to this day. On Tuesday, October 11, 1892, “Professor Stanton took me aside and told me that I was second prize in scholarship last year. After dinner, I went to his home and received the books. They are Bryce’s American Commonwealth (2 vol), Couses’ Bird life of New England (2 vol) and Maynard’s Manual of Butterflies.” In late September of that year he notes, “Went to the reception at Pres. Cheney’s with most of the students. Had a nice time.” Given the size of the school such a gathering is rather unremarkable; however, even to this day, presidents of both Bates and Trinity still hold similar gatherings in their homes.

Not only does Page give us a window into the typical student of the late 1800’s, but his writings also show how religion was still a major influence on the institution, despite an act by state legislators officially changing the name from Maine State Seminary to Bates College in 1864. There remained a desire for religion to be an essential part of the curriculum and of student life. As Bates College and Its Background (1936) explains, “The establishment
The two school scrapbooks in the exhibition were compiled by Frank Dorner of Thomaston, CT (Bates Class of 1921) and Edwin Lazarus of Benton, PA (Trinity Class of 1914). They are the most revealing of any of the pieces in the exhibit, for they are the early 20th-century equivalent of today’s Facebook. Even more interesting is the almost prophetic timing each was produced. For Edwin Lazarus, the world was on the brink of its first industrial war, one which would rip Europe apart and allow for the rise of Hitler a decade later. In fact, Lazarus would discuss this impending European crisis in his commencement speech where he argues make food, not war.

For Frank Dorner, he entered Bates at the same time the U.S. rescinded its isolationist policies as a means of putting an end to World War I. Moved to help, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy, although he never saw action. Tragically, he died prior to his graduation from Bates due to a football related injury during his senior year. However, what he left was an incredible account of his three years at Bates. Interestingly, newspaper clippings extend past the date of his death which leads me to believe a friend or family member added to it as a way of keeping his memory alive.

Unlike the struggling Bates class of 1894, Edwin Lazarus’ class at Trinity would be the largest of it’s time. He would, as his class reunion update would describe, become a social studies teacher and adopt two children with his wife. It is clear that his fraternity was one of the largest influences on his college experience. In fact, most of his social life centered on being a member of a fraternity. In fact, the report card for his freshman year shows he perhaps should have spent a bit less time with friends and a bit more in the library. Grades aside, the young Edwin’s scrapbook, when compared with that of Frank Dorner, shows the typical pattern of the college student; dance—study (sometimes)—spend time with friends—(and repeat). Sound familiar?

This exhibit is about not the brick and mortar of Bates and Trinity, but rather the people they serve. Students and faculty represent the heart of the college, and the people highlighted in this exhibit bring the colleges alive in their respective historical moments.
This catalog was produced to fulfill (in part) the graduate course requirements for American Studies 835: Museum & Library Exhibitions taught by Richard J. Ring, Head Curator of the Watkinson Library, Fall 2012.

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