

Climbing the Water Tower

How Women Went from Intruders to Leaders at Virginia Tech

Special Collections
University Libraries, Virginia Tech

<http://spec.lib.vt.edu>

Virginia Tech Women's Weekend, July 2015

The First Women at VPI

The first woman listed in the university catalog is **Frances Brockenbrough** as Superintendent of the Infirmary, starting in 1902.

The next year, **Mary G. Lacy** became the first female librarian and **Margaret Spencer** the President's Secretary.

The First Women at VPI

In 1910, **Ella Agnew** became the first female home demonstration agent *in the nation*, working in the Virginia Cooperative Extension until 1919. She was the first woman to receive VPI's Certificate of Merit in 1926.



L-R: Ella Agnew, Mary Moore Davis,
and Maude Wallace, May 1947



Agnew Hall became the first building on
campus named after a woman in 1949.

The First Women at VPI

In 1917, the state moved the Virginia Cooperative Extension under the auspices of VPI. With this move, **the first African American women** became non-resident staff of VPI as home demonstration agents and identified in the university catalog. The African American division was headquartered at the Hampton Institute, until moving to Virginia State University in 1930.

The First Women at VPI

One of the first African American female staff members was **Lizzie Arabella Jenkins**. She was appointed the first female African American Home Demonstration Agent in Virginia in 1913 and was inducted into the National 4-H Hall of Fame in 2006.

The First Women at VPI

Women are listed on the faculty for the first time in the 1921-1922 university catalog.

One of these women was **Mary Moore Davis**, professor and state home demonstration agent in the Extension Division, who was responsible for establishing the home economics courses and degree program.

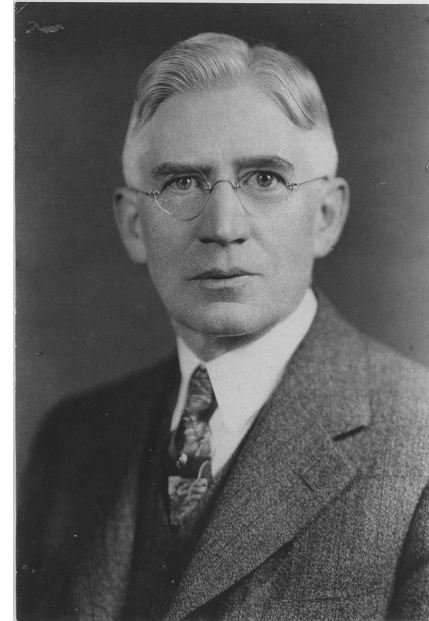


L-R: Ella Agnew, Mary Moore Davis,
and Maude Wallace, May 1947

The First Female Students

Prior to September 1921, women were allowed to sit in regular class sessions for no credit and could attend summer classes at VPI starting in 1916.

In January 1921, **President Julian A. Burruss** proposed the admission of female students to the Board of Visitors, who unanimously voted to accept women to all courses of instruction for credit. The university bulletin for September 1922 states there is “no good reason for not doing so [opening the college to women].”



The First Female Students

In 1921, twelve women were admitted to VPI as undergraduates.

Five full-time students were

- Mary Brumfield,
- Lucy Lee Lancaster,
- Carrie T. Sibold,
- Ruth Terrett, and
- Billie Kabrich.

Seven part-time students were

- Lucy Randolph Brown,
- Lucy Butler Groth,
- Sarah Gainor Kessler,
- Hattie Mays,
- Lena Willis McDonald,
- Josephine Phlegar, and
- Margaret Robinson Walker.

The First Female Students

Initially, people assumed women would enter horticulture, home economics, and similar agriculture and Extension programs. However, **Mary Brumfield, Lucy Lee Lancaster, and Carrie Sibold** enrolled in applied biology; **Ruth Terrett** in civil engineering; and **Billie Kabrich** in applied chemistry.

The First Female Students

Mary Brumfield, a transfer student, was the first woman to graduate from VPI in 1923 and the first to earn a master's degree in 1925.



First Female Graduates, 1925 (L-R):

Mary Ella Carr Brumfield ('23; '25)

Ruth Louise Terrett ('25)

Lucy Lee Lancaster ('25)

Lousie Jacobs ('25)

Carrie Taylor Sibold ('25)

Women vs. Men

Cadets were not happy about the admittance of women. Some protested by throwing water on female students as they passed cadet dorms, booing them during official ceremonies, and even denouncing the women in the yearbook.

Women vs. Men

In the 1922 *Bugle*, one poem states,

“The Co-Ed is here
She belongs all alone in a class of her own
At VPI she has caused a wretched condition
We only have ten, but curses, what a collection
I’m peeved and I’m mad, I favor Co-ed extradition,
The sooner the better,
Or we shall let her murder our very tradition.”

Climbing the Water Tower

The book *Generations of Women Leaders at Virginia Tech* reports **Ruth Terrett** decided to prove herself equal to the men by donning a Cadet uniform and climbing the water tower, an early tradition of the male cadets. According to the 1925 *Tin Horn*, “After ‘Rat’ Terrett showed that she was determined to stick, her would-be tormentors fled.”



Ruth Terrett in the
1925 *Tin Horn*

Special Rules for Women

The first female students on campus were separated from the male students in several ways, as identified in the Sept. 1922 bulletin:

- Women were provided rooms in the homes of professors and administrators or in private residences in Blacksburg.
- Women had to eat in a dining hall separated from the cadet mess hall.
- College physicians would treat women in their homes (not the infirmary).

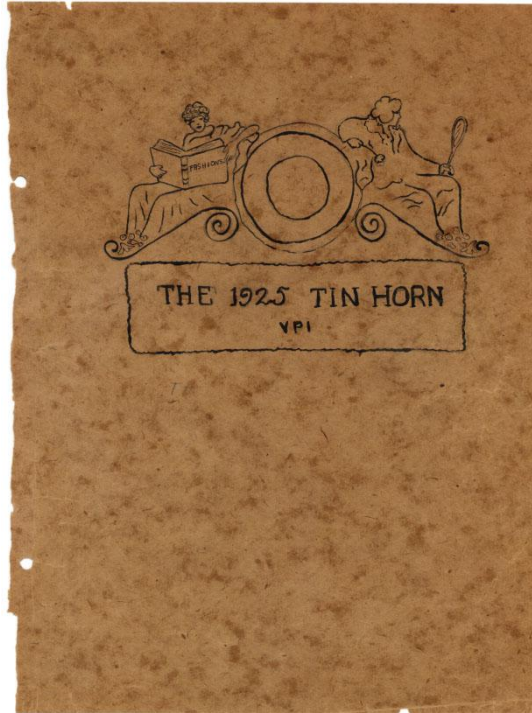
Special Rules for Women

The first female students on campus were separated from the male students in several ways, as identified in the Sept. 1922 bulletin:

- Segregated physical education classes were provided.
- Female students were expected to behave “in a manner entirely befitting a lady” and “to be subject to chaperonage of women officials of the college”.

Women were not allowed to wear slacks on campus until 1968,
and women in the corps could not wear pants until 1974!

Women in the Yearbook



Not allowed in *The Bugle*, the first female students created their own yearbook, *The Tin Horn*, in 1925, 1929, 1930, and 1931.

In the 1920s and 1930s, women depicted in the yearbook were generally sponsors of men's groups or select female employees. Female students were occasionally listed or shown with coed clubs.

In 1940, *The Bugle* started to list and depict individual female students by class.

Early Organizations for Women

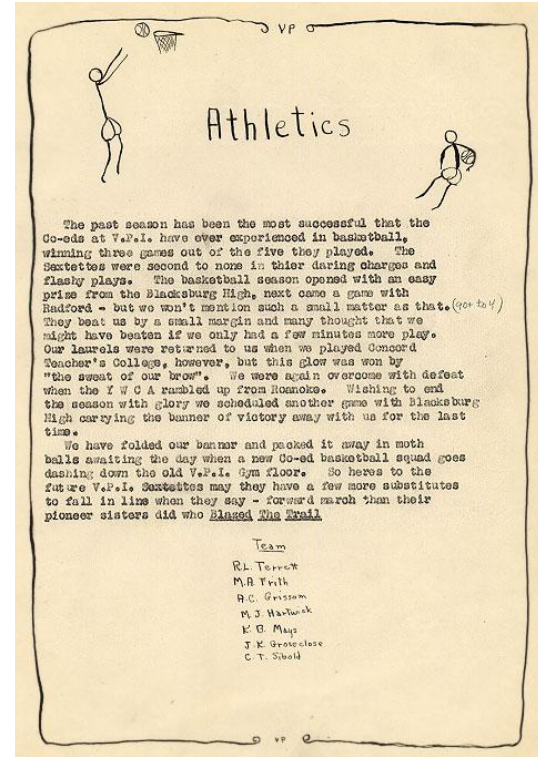
The VPI chapter of the **American Association of University Women (AAUW)** was formed in 1926.

In 1934, female students formed a **women's student union**. The group merged with the male civilian students' union in 1939 to establish the Civilian Student Body.

Women in Athletics

By 1925, Ruth Terrett formed the first women's sports club, a **basketball team named the Sextettes** (later, the Turkey Hens). During the first season, they played against teams from Radford College, Concord Teacher's College, the Roanoke YMCA, and Blacksburg High School.

Male students would pay to attend and root for the opposition.



The Tin Horn, 1925

Women in Athletics

Women joined the **cheerleading team** as early as 1941, but the team was not officially recognized as co-ed by the university until the 1955-1956 squad.

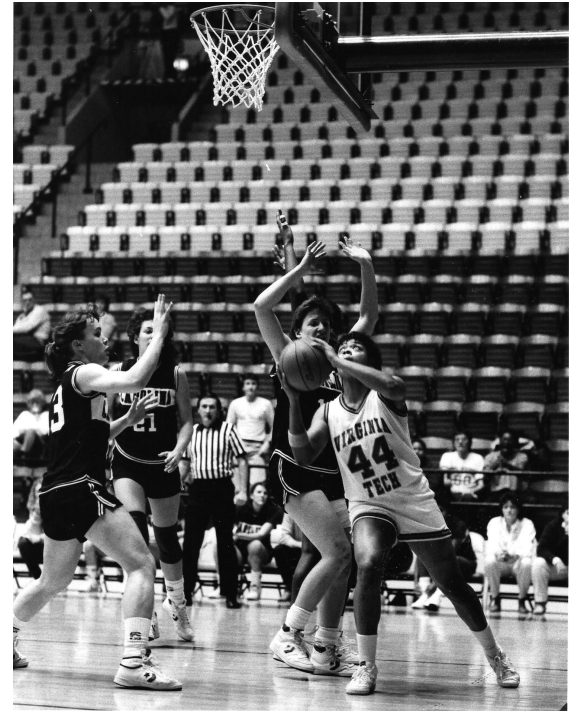
The university recognized the **first intramural teams** for women in 1967, starting with basketball.

In 1970, the university established a swim team as the **first intercollegiate competitive sport** for women and allowed women to compete on the gymnastics team.

Women in Athletics

Basketball player **Renee Dennis** ('89) was the first female athlete at VT to have her jersey retired in 1988. She became the first African American woman inducted into the Virginia Tech Sports Hall of Fame in 1997.

The first woman inducted into the Virginia Tech Sports Hall of Fame was track and field athlete **Lucy Hawk Banks** ('80) in 1993.



Renee Dennis, #44

Women on the Board of Visitors

When VPI and Radford College consolidated in 1944, the Board of Visitors added its first female board members.



Board of Visitors, c. 1951

Seated: Mrs. R. L. McConnell; L. W. Welch; W. E. Wine, Rector; Cynthia A. Boatwright; Mrs. H. H. Walton
Standing: A. T. Eckridge; C. W. Wampler; W. H. Burrus; J. P. Fishburg; V. G. Eberwine; E. D. Nininger; Col. C. H. Reed
Not pictured: Dr. Mary Phlegar Smith; Dr. D. J. Howard; Mr. Paul Mellon

Women on the Board of Visitors



In 2014, **Deborah L. Petrine** was appointed Rector of the Board of Visitors, the first woman to serve in the position in the school's 142 years.

First Dean of Women

From 1937 to 1947, **Dr. Mildred Tate** served as the first administrator dedicated to female students. Initially working without a title, she officially became the Dean of Women in 1942.



Kroger scholarship dinner, 1953 (L-R):
L. B. Dietrick; **Dr. Mildred Tate**;
Jack Tyree; and Jean Short Hutson

Campus Housing for Women

When administrators first discussed admitting female students, they expected enrollment to be so low that women could be housed in the president's residence (pictured) instead of a dorm.

Instead, women had to stay in rooms provided by faculty and administrators or in private residences in Blacksburg.



Campus Housing for Women



Hillcrest Hall dining room

Dr. Mildred Tate was instrumental in **Hillcrest Hall** being built in 1940. As the first on-campus housing for women students, Hillcrest was referred to as “the Skirt Barn” by members of the campus community.

Campus Housing for Women

After VPI merged with **Radford College** in 1944, incoming undergraduate women were required to live and attend classes at the Radford campus.

Exceptions were provided for women over 21, legal residents of Blacksburg, and students pursuing specialized programs in math, science, engineering, and agriculture.

Women's housing on campus remained limited until 1964, when the VPI-Radford College merger was dissolved.



Founder's Hall, Radford College, c. 1949

Campus Housing for Women

During **Martha Harder's tenure as Dean of Women** from 1966 to 1968, the number of women admitted rose from 300 to 600 or more per year. Formerly male dorms - including Eggleston and Campbell halls - were opened to female students.

Shortly afterwards, Harder received a call from an older professor who asked, "Do you know there are women on the upper quad?"

Harder replied, "I certainly hope so - they live there now!"

Deans of Women and of Men Abolished

From Clara B. Cox's *Generations of Women Leaders at Virginia Tech* (1996):

In 1969 the Office of Student Affairs was reorganized, and the men's and women's student affairs programs were combined. According to [then Dean of Women Martha] Harder, "At that time the Dean of Students, Dean of Women, and Dean of Men positions were all abolished. I became Dean of Student Programs and the Dean of Men--Gordon Brown--became Dean of Student Services." The reorganization, Harder says, "signified the end of many segregated activities on the campus and was also the first time that student affairs had a woman who was supervising male staff members."

Female Students in the 1950s

Dr. Betty Delores Stough (parasitology, '53)
was the first woman to earn a PhD at VPI.

Kamini Mohan Patwary (M.S. Statistics, '55)
was the first Indian woman to graduate.

First African American Women Faculty



In 1970, **Heidi Ford** became one of the first African American women to work on campus at Virginia Tech. Ford joined the non-resident staff in 1948 as a home demonstration agent in Nelson County. She served as a leader of special programs for several years before joining the campus in 1970 as an associate professor. Ford retired in 1985 as an equal employment opportunity officer.

First African American Women Faculty

In 1974, **Ella Louise Bates** appointed to the faculty of Housing, Design and Resource Management in the College of Human Resources and **Johnnie Miles** to the faculty of Administrative & Educational Service in the College of Education.



Johnnie Miles

First Female Academic Dean

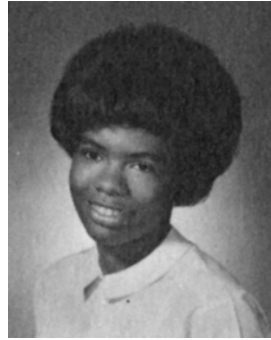


In 1960, **Dr. Laura Jane Harper** became the first Dean of the School of Home Economics. She was instrumental in increasing the number of women's programs on the campus as well as continuing to rally support for them.

Harper Hall is named in her honor.

First African American Women Students

In 1966, the first African American women are admitted as students.



L-R: Linda Adams ('68); Dr. Linda L. Edmonds ('70, MBA '76, PhD '79); LaVerne "Freddie" Hairston; Marguerite L. Harper ('70); Jacquelyn "Jackie" Butler ('70); Chiquita Hudson

In 1968, transfer student Linda Adams became the first African American woman to graduate from VPI.

Women in the Corps of Cadets

In 1959, **Patricia Ann Miller** ('59) became the first woman to receive a commission at Virginia Tech. Every semester she enrolled in corps classes but was denied. She applied for a commission from the Army Women's Medical Specialist Corps and was commissioned during graduation after the male cadets.



L-R: Lt. Col. Raymond O. Miller, CE, USA and
2nd Lt. Patricia Ann Miller, Army Special Corps

Women in the Corps of Cadets

1973 Twenty-five women joined the “**L Squadron**”, the first women’s unit in a military cadet corps in the United States. **Deborah J. Noss** was the first L Squadron commander, while **Cheryl A. Butler** (‘76) was the first African American woman in the Corps and first African American L Squadron commander.



Cheryl A. Butler,
c. 1974-1975



L Squadron, Deborah J. Noss (far left)
as Commander, c. 1973-1974

Women in the Corps of Cadets

1975 The first women joined the Highty Tighties.

1979 L Squadron disbanded, and women were integrated into the line companies along with male cadets.

1981 The Cadet dorms became coed.



L Squadron, Cheryl A. Butler (far left)
as Commander, c. 1974-1975



Highty Tighties with two of the
first female members, c. 1975-1976

Women in the Corps of Cadets

1987 **Denise Shuster** ('88) became the first female regimental commander.

2005 **Christina Royal** (sociology, '06) is the first African American female regimental commander (and the fourth woman in the position).



Christina Royal (center)



Denise Shuster

More Firsts for Female Students

In 1967, **Sue Ann "Susie" Shertzer** ('68) became the first woman student to be elected president of the YMCA and the only woman in the country to head a campus chapter of the organization.

Jean Harshbarger ('74) was the first woman elected class president, by the class of 1974.



Jean Harshbarger with
Rep. William C. Wampler, c. 1974

More Firsts for Female Students

In the fall of 1968, **Jacqueline D. Dandridge** (biology, '71) was the first woman of color to become homecoming princess.

Marva L. Felder (biology, '83) was the first African American homecoming queen.



Left: Felder with William Billups, Jr. at 1983 Homecoming

Right: Dandridge (far left) in 1968 Homecoming Court



First Women in Executive Positions

In 1982, **Sandra Sullivan** was named Vice President for Student Affairs, becoming the first woman to hold a university-wide executive position on the campus.

First Women in Executive Positions



Dr. Peggy S. Meszaros served as the first (and currently only) female Senior Vice President and Provost at Virginia Tech from 1995 through 2000.

First Women in Executive Positions

In 2002, Virginia Tech hired **Dr. Karen P. DePauw** as Graduate Dean and Vice Provost of Graduate Studies, now Vice President and Dean for Graduate Education. She is also the first openly gay administrator.



VT Women Changing the World

The **Women and Gender in International Development (WGD)** program was formally established in 1982.

Through interdisciplinary research and collaboration with global partners, the WGD program helps promote gender equity and the participation of women as major stakeholders in development projects around the world.

VT Women Changing the World

In 1985, the CAUS and the University Libraries jointly established an initiative to document women's contributions to architecture and design around the world.

Today, the International Archives of Women in Architecture (IAWA) maintains collections for over 350 women and organizations from 37 countries.



Milka Bliznakov (1927-2010)
IAWA founder,
Professor Emerita of Architecture

Women in the Student Population

1921-22 - 12 out of 975 students (1.3%)

1958-59 - 218 out of 5,318 students (4.1%)

1967-68 - 1,168 out of 10,254 students (11.4%)

1971-72 - 3,491 out of 13,282 students (26.3%)

1995-96 - 9,737 out of 25,492 students (38.2%)

2014-15 - 13,241 out of 31,224 students (42.4%)

According to *Clara Cox's Generations of Women Leaders at Virginia Tech (1996)*, women reached approximately 40% of the student population in the 1980s.

Women on the Faculty

1921-22 - 5 out of 106 members (4.7%)

1985-86 - 189 out of 1,464 members (12.9%)

1995-96 - 512 out of 2,021 members (25.3%)

2014-15 - 1,525 out of 3,860 members (39.5%)

What's *your* story?

Do **you** have a story to tell? Write it down on one of our story cards or ask how you can contribute to Special Collections.