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The Curious Case of a Women's Academic Collar

By Valentina S. Grub

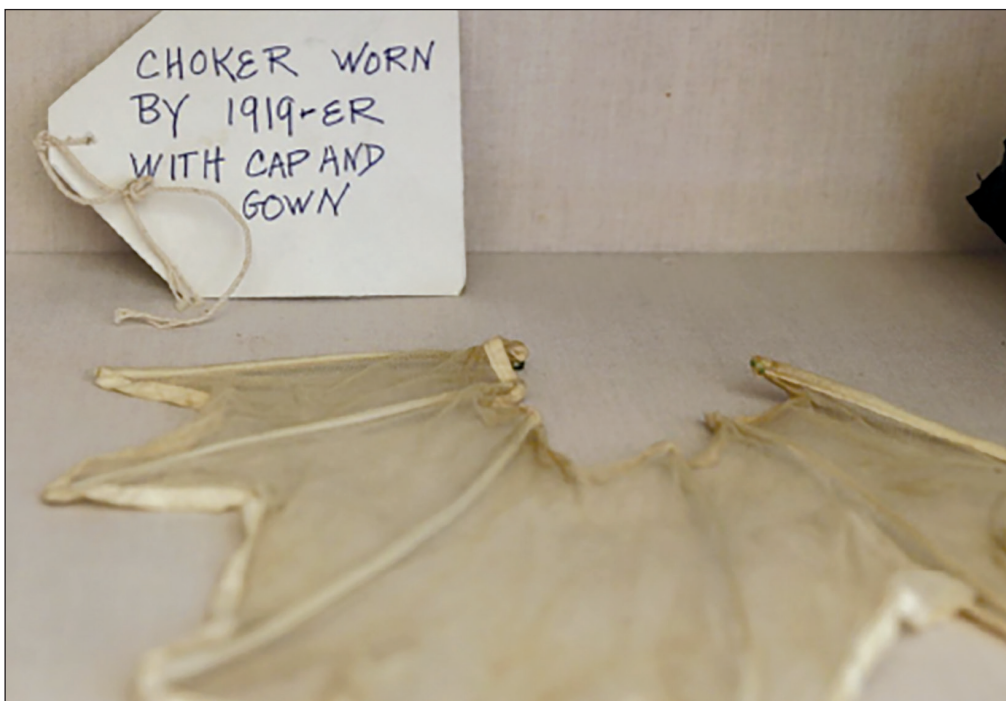
In the summer of 2019, deep within the blissfully climate-controlled recesses of the Clapp Library at Wellesley College in Wellesley, Massachusetts, an archivist broke the seal of a centennial time capsule. The modest box had been returned to the College, unopened, by the family of alumna Julia Brannack-Rees in 1994.¹ When the century had elapsed, the contents were revealed to the wider Wellesley alumnae community: a copy of the student newspaper dated 1 June 1916; a train schedule from Wellesley to Boston (the nearest city, a trip which takes about 45 minutes); a dance card from the 1919 sophomore ball; and a 'graduation collar' (see Fig. 1).

One could be forgiven for assuming this accessory to be a standard part of an early-twentieth-century lady's wardrobe: however, the fashionable high collars for women were invariably made of lace and were part of the bodice, while detachable collars were made of stiffly starched cotton or linen. This 'collar'² is made of fine mesh and, most unusually, is sectioned into panels by lengths of boning. The ends would have been drawn around the back of the neck and fastened by a row of tiny, cumbersome hooks and eyes. As an academic accessory, such a collar has hitherto been unknown to the academic dress academe. Moreover, it offers a scholarly window into the distinctive challenges and changes that women's academic dress underwent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In mid-nineteenth century America, women's seminaries were established as a counterpoint to men's colleges. However, while their male counterparts immediately adopted various iterations of academic gowns, these seminaries struggled to formalize their own academic attire. Some seminaries and colleges, such as Mississippi University for Women (1884, Columbus, Mississippi), Spelman College (founded as the Atlanta Baptist Female Seminary in 1881, Atlanta, Georgia), Fisk University (originally the Fisk Freed Colored School, founded 1866 in Nashville, Tennessee) prescribed dark and sombre dresses while others, such as the Troy Female Seminary (1821, Troy, New York) had their students wear flowing white dresses for commencement. Other institutions had no prescribed graduation attire for women at all. Oberlin College (established as Oberlin Collegiate Institute in 1833, Oberlin, Ohio) is the oldest co-educational institute of higher education in the United States; however, well into the nineteenth century, female

1 It is unclear why the alumna, rather than the school, was in possession of the time capsule. One possibility is that the objects were gathered by an unofficial group of students rather than the entire class. Another theory is that, after the devastating College fire in 1914 when the entire College building burned to the ground, the College was still being rebuilt when the class of 1919 put together their time capsule and there was no appropriate venue at the campus for storage.

2 In the archival image of the collar, the accompanying label describes it as a 'choker' worn by a 1919-er (i.e., member of the class of 1919). Though more properly called a standing collar, the effect may have inflicted a choking sensation on its wearer.



Wellesley College Public Affairs, 10 June 2019

Fig. 1. 'Wellesley Graduation Collar 1919', from the Class of 1919 Time Capsule.

graduands simply wore good day dresses for graduation photographs³ (see Fig. 2).

On the other side of the Atlantic, while British universities were slower to accept women into their ranks, from their first graduation they wore academic robes much like their male counterparts.⁴ Perhaps inspired by the sartorial gravitas exhibited by British female scholars, American female students pressed for their own academic attire. In 1889, the first petition by an entire class at Wellesley College demanded that they be allowed to wear the Oxford cap and gown to their graduation later that year. The poem that prefaced the petition reveals the unfounded worries and patronizing tone the students encountered in response to their request (see Appendix A). Though they were permitted to wear their Oxford caps and gowns to Tree Day celebrations (when the sophomores plant a class



Oberlin College Archives, Record RG 32/3.
Box 2.1855

Fig. 2. 'Young female graduates of the class of 1855, with teachers in the front row.' Photograph from a daguerreotype.

³ Roland M. Baumann, *Constructing Black Education at Oberlin College: A Documentary History* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2010), p. 64.

⁴ For an image of the first 'Lady BA of London University', see *The Graphic Newspaper*, 16 May 1885, British Library, online at <www.bl.uk/collection-items/picture-of-a-female-graduate-of-london-university-from-the-graphic> [retrieved 24 May 2022].



'Concerning Caps, Gowns and Hoods', No. 24, c. 1910, p. 5

Fig. 3. Graduation Gown Type 5 with an open front, from Cotrell & Leonard, Albany, N.Y.



John Engelhardt Scott Negative Collection. LPP116, PN Box 222. Alabama Department of Archives and History. Montgomery

Fig. 4. 'Judson photograph of graduates of Judson College in Marion, Alabama, c. 1900'. Scott, John Engelhardt. Photographic negative.



Left: FJ.3627 Forsyth County Public Library, Forsyth County N.C. Right: *The Academy* [1890-1905][Yearbook], Salem Academy and College Archives, Winston-Salem, N.C.

Fig. 5. Salem College graduation ceremonies. Left: 'Salem College graduation with the students carrying a daisy chain as they walk into Home Moravian Church', c. 1890. Right: 'Senior Daisy Chain, Commencement Morning', c. 1901.

**Fig. 6. '1915.
May Day',
Wellesley
College.**



Wellesley College Digital Archives image

tree) and formal dinners, the petition to wear their academic attire to their graduations was denied.

Other colleges and universities gradually adopted various forms of academic attire for their female graduands. Cotrell & Leonard's *Concerning Caps, Gowns and Hoods* (1910) shows at least two women's gowns, though there is evidence that American women graduands began wearing academic robes at least a decade earlier (see Fig. 3). For instance, Judson College (formerly Judson Female Institute in Marion, Alabama, founded 1838) mandated for its class of 1900 a rather unfortunate combination of the Oxford cap and gown with a dark green worsted dress and large, floppy collar worn over the gown (see Fig. 4). The students of Salem College, once called Salem Female Academy and College, in Winston-Salem, N.C. (founded 1772), first wore white Oxford caps and gowns over white dresses in the 1890s, but by 1901 had shifted to black caps and gowns (see Fig. 5). Cornell University (Ithaca, New York), though founded in 1865, admitted women only in 1872. Though it is unclear if women wore academic dress from the outset, by as early as 1906 Cornell allowed women to wear black Oxford caps and gowns over white dresses.⁵ Significantly, by the publication of Cotrell & Leonard's catalogue in 1910, Wellesley College had allowed its students to wear black cap and gown, as had the other Seven Sisters Colleges.⁶

⁵ Elaine Engst and Blaine Friedlander, 'Cornell Rewind: Commencements Back in the Day', *Cornell Chronicle*, 20 (May 2015), online at <news.cornell.edu/stories/2015/05/cornell-rewind-commencements-back-day> [retrieved 24 May 2022].

⁶ The Seven Sisters are a group of historic, women-only colleges in the northeast of the United States. They were named for the Pleiades, the seven daughters of the Titan Atlas. These colleges are: Mount Holyoke College (formerly Mount Holyoke Seminary in South Hadley, Massachusetts, founded 1837); Vassar College (Poughkeepsie, New York, founded in 1861); Wellesley College (founded 1870); Smith College (Northampton, Massachusetts, founded 1871); Radcliffe College (Cambridge, Massachusetts, founded 1879); Bryn Mawr College (Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, founded 1885); and Barnard College (New York, founded 1889). All are still women-only colleges except for Vassar, which is now co-educational, and Barnard and Radcliffe, which were subsumed into Columbia University and Harvard University, respectively.



Courtesy of the Mount Holyoke Archives

Fig. 7. Mount Holyoke College, 1916.

However, the wider changes in the fashion world began to impact women's academic fashions. From the heights of Edwardian lace collars, necklines plunged—by the standards of the day—to just below the collar bone. It is unclear whether collegiate administrators found the new fashions too revealing, too casual (as the lower necklines were either worn with open square collars, or without collars altogether), or both. In any event, at Wellesley College's May Day celebrations of 1915, we see the first evidence of the academic, or graduation, collar (see Fig. 6). In the photograph two women are wearing lace collars attached to their bodices in a more traditional style while three women are wearing the new boned collars. None of the three, boned collar-wearing scholars looks amused, and it is no wonder: the new collars are much longer than their older lace ones, and the boning made them much stiffer.

These boned collars were adopted by other colleges soon after. Mount Holyoke adopted them, some students even wearing them to a suffrage rally in 1916, as seen in Figure 7.⁷ Coeducational institutions also adopted the collars, such as the University of Delaware (Newark, Delaware, founded in 1743, officially admitted women in 1914). The first forty-eight women to graduate from that university are shown in cap, gown, and collars in 1918. (See Fig. 8.)

The collars were met with universal derision by the student bodies. At Wellesley College in particular students were vehement in their dislike of the academic accessory. The increasing contempt for the collars is demonstrated through editorials in the student newspaper: while in 1926 they were sarcastically referred to as 'drole' (Appendix B), an anonymous author in 1930 wrote, 'Net and whalebone, high collar[s] [*sic*], d--- them.'⁸ By 1934, an editorial proclaimed, One student in 1934 wrote in the college newspaper, 'have you seen the ungraceful projection of the head necessitated by these boned neck pieces? They are uncomfortable in the extreme as well as unbecoming. A person is forced to hold her chin high or have the bones, however small, push into her chin' (Appendix C). The collars became the butt of jokes and the subject of cartoons. (See Fig. 9.)

While the collars were quietly phased out from other colleges' academic raiment, Wellesley's administration was as loath to part with the boned collars as their prede-

⁷ The intersection of female academic dress (and its depiction) and the suffrage movement is a subject ripe for further study.

⁸ "The News Hound," *The Wellesley News*, 19 June 1930, Vol. 38, No. 31, p. 2, online at <repository.wellesley.edu/object/wellesley10728> [retrieved 24 May 2022].

Fig. 8. University of Delaware's first female class in 1918.



Courtesy of University of Delaware Archives

Fig. 9. 'Collar Caricatures', a cartoon at Wellesley College.



Legenda, Wellesley College, 1920, p. 59

cessors were wary of the Oxford cap and gown.⁹ In spite of pleas throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the last boned collars were seen at graduation in 1940. This is somewhat unsurprising given that part of the College's campus was commissioned as a naval Supply Corps School and many academic events were curtailed.

When the 1919 time capsule was opened at Wellesley College, archivist Rebecca Goldman held it up to show Maggie Olmsted (class 2021) how it would have been worn. The collar was met with mirth, bemusement, and certainly no little relief that female graduands in the United States no longer need to corset their necks.¹⁰

⁹ It should also be noted that, while undergraduates and graduands were required to wear these collars, none of the female faculty were subjected to them.

¹⁰ Maggie Olmsted, '100 Years Later: Time Capsule from Wellesley's Class of 1919 Featured in Library Display', *Wellesley College News*, 14 August 2019, online at <www.wellesley.edu/news/2019/stories/node/168481> [retrieved 24 May 2022].

Appendix A

‘Senior Cap and Gown’

The Oxford caps and gowns we gaily bought
And then, a chance to wear, we vainly sought.
Alack! The ‘powers that were’ did sternly frown
Upon a Wellesley Maid in Cap and Gown.
‘Oh, you will ape the men, the men,’ they said,
‘If cap you place upon your girlish head.
A cap and gown the Chapel ne’er did see!
Commencement robes of dainty white must be!
Establishment of precedents we fear
If your request we grant, oh children dear.
But Tree Day you may march in sombre hue
(The privilege we gladly give to you)
And at the supper of your class so gay,
If all the rules you carefully obey.’
On Tree Day, then, our gowns first saw the light,
And crocked [*sic*] with black each dress of snowy white.
Again on Supper night those robes we wore
In private dining room behind closed door.
The times have changed since Eighteen Eighty Nine
When caps and gowns were not allowed in line
Today, if in procession you would be
Collegiate garb is a necessity.¹¹

Appendix B

The seniors will leave quite a hole
Now commencement has taken its toll.
For they looked so renowned
All capped and gowned
And that whalebone and net was so
Drole!¹²

¹¹ Class of 1889 Petition. Wellesley College Archives, Clapp Library, Box 1, Folder 1 of 6C/1889, ‘Students: General, 1887–1889’.

¹² *The Wellesley News*, 24 June 1926, Vol 34, No. 32, online at <repository.wellesley.edu/object/wellesley10598> [retrieved 24 May 2022].

Appendix C

'Comfort For Juniors'

To the Wellesley College News:

We issue this as a challenge to the junior class: Are we, the class of 1935, to be inflicted with the mania for high collars with our senior gowns?

Have you watched the present and past seniors file down the Chapel aisle, and have you seen the ungraceful projection of the head necessitated by these boned neck pieces? They are uncomfortable in the extreme as well as unbecoming. A person is forced to hold her chin high or have the bones, however small, push into her chin. Furthermore, we, as individuals, feel that the informal collars, with their sleek simplicity, are just as dignified and suitable, and much more becoming to young faces.

Can we not dispense with these time-honored high collars and appear in the more comfortable and equally impressive informal love collars? It will soon be time to decide on this question; let us have the courage to break from tradition for once. -1935¹³

¹³ *The Wellesley News*, 26 April 1934, Vol. 42, No. 24, online at <repository.wellesley.edu/object/wellesley10845> [retrieved 24 May 2022].