The Douglass Century

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After the stock market crash of 1929, the United States soon found itself in the most devastating economic depression in the country’s history. The Great Depression had a profound effect on colleges and universities. “This country lost a generation of college graduates in the classes of the early thirties. Almost everyone knew someone who couldn’t go to college because of the Depression.”¹ Those who were able to pursue higher education became more aware of the evils of American capitalism and many were radicalized, contributing to the launch of the United States’ first student movement in the early 1930s. With the failures of capitalism more and more apparent, many students, intellectuals, and working-class labor activists were attracted to communism and socialism, which some conservatives characterized as the second “Red Scare.”² By the middle of the decade, the rise of Hitler in Germany and Mussolini in Italy and the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War began to overshadow economic concerns. The threat of war and fascism gave a new urgency to the student movement. Although important women leaders like First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, consumer advocate Frances Perkins, and civil rights activist Mary McLeod Bethune emerged in this period, women suffered badly during the depression. In times of hardship, young women were less likely to attend college than were their brothers. Viewed by society as breadwinners, men were often preferred for jobs over women. Women who did find employment earned less than men and had to stop working when they married or had children.³

During the depression, New Jersey College for Women students, many of whom were from families of modest means, struggled to stay in college. While enrollment fell,
the college administration wrestled with the need to accommodate students from more
diverse backgrounds. Far from an ivory tower, NJC became a locus of student activism,
and it found itself in the national press as it was rocked by an unforeseen political scan-
dal. Changing times challenged both faculty and students to become more aware of the
college’s place on the global stage. Meanwhile the usual round of classes, examinations,
club meetings, dances, and social events continued. This chapter explores the particular
challenges of this decade.

Last Days of Dean Douglass

RELATIONS WITH THE UNIVERSITY
Despite NJC’s success during the 1920s, Dean Mabel Smith Douglass faced increasing
personal and professional challenges. In the early 1920s, Douglass’s two teenage chil-
dren, Edith and William, seemed to be doing well. The family was living at 135 George
Street, a dignified Victorian house near the entrance to NJC (more recently occupied
by the Douglass Writing Center). Edith, the elder, attended the prestigious girls’ school,
Kent Place, in Summit, New Jersey, while William attended the Rutgers Preparatory
School in New Brunswick. On September 3, 1923, tragedy struck when sixteen-year
old William was found dead of a self-inflicted gunshot wound in the family home. His
funeral was held on September 7 with Rutgers president William Demarest officiating,
and the boy was buried in the family plot in Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn.4

Despite reeling from shock and grief, Douglass carried on with her college duties.
Although the tragedy was kept quiet, Douglass’s close friends and associates were aware
of her suffering. In a letter discussing his support for the college’s music program,
trustee William H. Leupp wrote, “Please be assured that you have my deep sympathy in
your late trouble. I am sure I can speak feelingly and trusting brighter days will soon
come to you.”5

Throughout her life, Douglass herself was afflicted by chronic ill-health, both men-
tal and physical. She had largely withdrawn from the women’s college movement from
1915 to 1918. According to college historian George Schmidt, “worn down by over-
work and domestic worries, she had been ordered by her physician to give up all her
club activities and left the state for an extended rest.”6 This period was punctuated by
personal loss—Douglass endured the deaths of both her husband and her mother,
Minnie Smith, during this time.

Apparently Douglass also suffered from chronic back pain. In December 1925,
after a fall, an X-ray revealed a congenital deformity in her coccyx that may have con-
tributed to the pain.7 In August 1927, Douglass and her daughter, Edith, who had just
graduated from NJC, took a trip to Europe, where they visited Prague, and Douglass
took a cure at the Marienbad spa. Apparently Douglass was ill again in December 1929
and March 1930, and she did not preside at the 1930 commencement. A New York
doctor diagnosed chronic arthritis or gout in her feet.8 As professor of drama Jane Inge
wrote, “The College is not the same without you, now that you are ill everyone realized how very largely the College means you.” That Douglass’s illnesses had mental as well as physical components would be borne out by later events.

Another cause of stress for Mabel Smith Douglass was the deteriorating relationship between NJC and Rutgers University. With the retirement of President Demarest in 1924, Douglass lost a valued ally and supporter. The new president, John Martin Thomas, was committed to making Rutgers a full-fledged state university. He created several cross-university bodies such as the University Council, made up of the five deans, who met weekly to plan and coordinate university policy; and a University Faculty, in which there was little participation from NJC. More important, Thomas sought to present a unified budget request to the state, ending the practice in which Douglass and the other deans had petitioned Trenton directly for funds. Douglass wrote that as a woman and dean of NJC, she was the best person to represent the needs
of the college noting, “The problem of the women students is quite distinct and apart. Their virtues, their desires, their needs: these are of a different sort.”

For the next five years, Douglass and the NJC Board of Managers, led by Leonor Loree, fought with Thomas over the autonomy of the women’s college. In 1926, working with the U.S. Bureau of Education, Thomas commissioned a comprehensive study of higher education in New Jersey. Douglass found the resulting survey disturbing and intrusive, learning from Board of Managers member Marie Katzenbach, who served on the state Board of Education and whose husband, Edward, was the New Jersey attorney general, that the commission was critical of the education courses at NJC. Douglass noted correctly that teacher training was not the core mission of NJC: “We can never supply all the teachers needed and it would not be a good thing for the State if we could.” Notably, the survey was also critical of the excessive authority wielded by the Board of Managers.

The final report of the commission, released in March 1927, found higher education in New Jersey as a whole woefully inadequate and noted that 80 percent of New Jersey students attended college outside the state. Because of complex factors, including inadequate tax revenues and doubt over the legal status of Rutgers’s private Board of Trustees, an impasse was reached over the university’s funding. Mabel Smith Douglass was concerned about the implications for NJC’s autonomy and status. Writing to Loree before a Board of Trustees meeting, Douglass warned him to beware of suggestions regarding “placing the college for women on a par with other colleges in the University or making the Dean of the College for Women coordinate in rank with the other deans of the University, as per recommendations of Survey Committee—recommendations being but a veiled attempt to cripple the growth of the College for Women.”

To try to break the impasse, in 1927, new governor A. Harry Moore and the legislature appointed a commission to examine the existing relation of the state with Rutgers University. Chaired by Edward D. Duffield, president of Prudential Life Insurance Company, it became known as the Duffield Commission. During the commission’s deliberations, Douglass, Loree, and the New Jersey State Federation of Women’s Clubs conducted a campaign to secure autonomous status for NJC. Testifying before a public hearing of the commission, Douglass declared, “We were created as a department of a State University. . . . We never were created as a part of old colonial Rutgers.” The commission’s report, published in 1929, proposed establishing a state Board of Regents to oversee the university and, even more alarmingly, recommended studying the anomalous position of the college for women.

In May 1930, the newly created Board of Regents sought to bring NJC under more direct supervision by the Rutgers trustees. The resulting controversy led to the appointment of a special committee chaired by Edward Katzenbach to study the college for women. Meanwhile, President Thomas was increasingly concerned with NJC’s mounting debts. In June 1930, the Board of Managers sought to borrow $340,000
from the Rutgers trustees to enable the Jameson dormitory complex to be completed. In his annual report for 1930, Thomas expressed his serious concern about this debt, attacked Loree’s management of the college’s finances, and criticized the college’s low salaries and resulting high turnover in staff. This annual report would prove to be Thomas’s last. In September 1930, John Martin Thomas abruptly resigned to take a position with the National Life Insurance Company and trustee Philip M. Brett was named acting president.

The report of Katzenbach’s committee, published in June 1931, advocated the continued separate status of the women’s college with its own faculty, departments, and administration. The commission also recommended adding five women to the Rutgers Board of Trustees and replacing the Board of Managers by a trustees’ committee that would include the five women, five additional trustees, and the president of the university. After several more months of wrangling, the recommendations were adopted and the Rutgers charter was amended in April 1932. In reality, many of the same trustees, including Chairman Leonor Loree, served on this new committee. Women members of the Board of Managers like Marie Katzenbach, Florence Eagleton, and Miriam Lippincott were elevated to trustee status. The president of the New Jersey State Federation of Women’s Clubs continued to serve ex officio along with the president of the Associate Alumnae of New Jersey College for Women. A second alumnae representative was added in 1943. The main difference was that the committee was required to submit its annual budget to the Rutgers trustees.

ECONOMIC DEPRESSION
The impact of growing state control coincided with the onset of the economic depression in the autumn of 1929. Between 1929 and 1933, enrollment at NJC dropped from 1,157 to 961, while at Rutgers College, student numbers fell from 1,400 to 1,200 during this time. The state appropriation was reduced from $430,000 to $272,000. In the spring of 1931, the college had to borrow $175,000 to carry operations through the summer. Douglass noted an exceptional number of withdrawals from application for admission to the college because of lack of resources, four times as many as at the same time the previous year. Support for the men’s colleges was also drastically curtailed, as state revenues were redirected to care for the growing number of unemployed. In spring 1932, Douglass joined the new Rutgers president, Robert C. Clothier, in bypassing the Board of Regents to lobby the legislature directly. “Proposed reduction of appropriation for Rutgers University including New Jersey College for Women would involve disastrous consequences disrupting faculty and seriously impairing our service to the state.”

The effect of the Great Depression on NJC was devastating. All plans for new construction came to a standstill and even routine maintenance was delayed. A $350,000 request for a new physical education and hygiene building was rejected, and plans for a much-needed library and student center were put on hold. In fact, after the completion
of the Jameson dormitory complex in 1931, no new buildings rose on the NJC campus until a student center was finally built in 1953.

Still more damaging was the effect on faculty, programs, and students. The number of faculty was reduced from 131 in 1930–1931 to 107 in 1933–1934, where it remained for several years, primarily by not renewing the contracts of lower-ranked instructors and lecturers.23 Similarly, at Rutgers College, salaries were reduced, and fifty staff members lost their appointments. Most academic programs were preserved, although several “special bureaus,” including the Engineering Experiment Station, the Short Course in Engineering, and the Psychological and Mental Hygiene Clinic, were closed temporarily.24 At NJC, a decision was made to close the new School for Child Study after only two years. The School for Child Study had opened in House DD on the Douglass (Corwin) campus in October 1930 with an enrollment of twelve children and a waiting list of thirty. Modeled on similar nursery schools at Smith, Vassar, and Yale, it provided a laboratory for the departments of psychology, home economics, physical education, and art.25 Students taking classes in child development and child nutrition through the home economics department were scheduled for two hours a week at the school, “giving them an opportunity for observation and experience which they have lacked in the past.”26 The whole operation was overseen by Dr. Sidney Cook of the Department of Psychology. The staff included the director, Catherine Landreth (1899–1995), from New Zealand, who went on to become a distinguished professor at University of California–Berkeley and a pioneer in early childhood education; an assistant, NJC alumna Dorothy Hall; and a housekeeper. The school was supported by income from the children’s tuition fees.

NJC students suffered worst of all from the economic depression. When a drop in enrollment of thirty students was recorded in 1930–1931, the college raised tuition to compensate. The following year, as enrollment fell even further, raising fees again was clearly out of the question, so total income dropped.27 An editorial in Campus News urged students to stay in college. “Students who find themselves with scant financial resources for the continuance of their studies at N.J.C. are urged to remain in college even at the cost of personal hardship. . . . We are encouraging students to stay at college if they possibly can . . . because if they leave it will be very difficult for them to find employment sufficiently remunerative to meet present living expenses and to save enough to return to college.”28

Many students who lived within commuting distance opted to live at home. The percentage of commuters rose to over one-third of the total enrollment in 1934. In that year, twenty cottages on the Douglass and Gibbons campuses were closed, as was one of the large dining rooms at Cooper Hall. Two units of Jameson followed later, leaving 42 percent of dormitory space unoccupied.29 Private colleges with higher fees were losing even more students: some thirty-one women transferred to NJC because it was more affordable.30 Lucille Bourath, Class of 1933, from Bayonne, New Jersey, lived on campus for her first two years and commuted for her last two. Like many of her contem-
poraries, she struggled to find a job after graduation. Fewer jobs in teaching were available and women faced discrimination as male “breadwinners” were preferred for existing positions. A mathematics major, Bourath went on to Columbia University for a graduate degree but still could not find work. She was one of many graduates of the thirties who did not find steady employment until World War II.

The college and its supporters mobilized to find financial support for students. The young institution had few scholarships, however, to offer them. In spring 1930, with 10 percent of the student body requesting aid, the college had only $950 available in scholarships and no loan funds. Fredericka Belknap, the director of the new Personnel Bureau, which had been created to advise students on vocational opportunities, found herself deluged by requests for immediate aid. Traditionally, the only “self-help,” or work study, jobs that the college offered were waitresses in the dining halls, assistants in departments, and babysitting. As Mabel Smith Douglass wrote to Loree:

I really am greatly distressed over the possible decrease in our enrollment for the coming year. As I said at the Board meeting, many of the withdrawals which had already occurred [sic] were due to extreme financial embarrassment. We have had almost one hundred urgent requests from incoming freshmen for part-time positions through which they might obtain financial aid, and seventeen requests for scholarships. The waitress position is almost the only remunerative field open to freshmen—at least in their first semesters—and the number of freshmen waitresses must necessarily be limited.

The college created additional work opportunities for students whenever possible, including establishing campus agencies for newspaper delivery, caps and gowns, cosmetics, photographs, cleaning, flowers, candy, and cigarettes, although student purchasing power decreased during the depression. The self-help crisis was solved only by the advent of federally funded programs in the mid-1930s.

Fortunately, the college was able to create a student loan fund of sixty thousand dollars from the income from the Elizabeth Rodman Voorhees endowment. The staff of the Personnel Bureau labored to find scholarships and loans for students from sources outside the college. The barely ten-year-old Associate Alumnae mobilized, hosting dances, bridge, and theater benefits to raise money for student aid and beginning systematic fund-raising for the college. In 1926, the Associate Alumnae had established a magazine, the *Alumnae Bulletin*, and in 1931 created the office of paid secretary. The editor of the *Bulletin* and secretary of the association were admitted to faculty meetings ex officio. Alumnae clubs, which had been organized in a number of counties throughout the state, worked with local high schools to recruit more students for NJC. The New Jersey State Federation of Women’s Clubs cooperated with alumnae clubs to recruit and aid students. Over time, the college accumulated more scholarship funds, so was better able to support undergraduates.
TRAGEDY AND TRANSITION

The pressure of the early depression years took a physical and mental toll on Mabel Smith Douglass. In September 1932, Douglass, who had been ill since the previous spring, took a leave of absence. Albert E. Meder Jr., a professor of mathematics, was appointed acting dean until Douglass was able to return. Since June 1, 1932, Douglass had been a patient at Four Winds, a private mental hospital at Cross River in Westchester County. On May 22, 1933, it was announced that for “reasons of health,” Douglass had decided not to return to work and that Meder would continue as interim dean. In fact, Douglass was still at Four Winds, where she would remain until July. Meder, who had been serving as Douglass’s assistant since 1929, was a competent administrator who later became secretary of the university and dean of administration. He shepherded NJC through the difficult years of the early 1930s, the loss of the college’s founding dean, and the appointment of a new dean in 1934. At that point, he returned to the faculty, teaching mathematics and serving on the Admissions Committee and as an adviser to the campus newspaper. In the early 1940s, he married NJC alumna Janet Davis (NJC ’41). Meder had a long and distinguished career, ultimately serving as a trustee of Union County College in the 1960s. He lived until the late 1980s.
On June 3, the trustees accepted Douglass’s resignation, granted her a generous pension, and formed a committee to search for a new dean. Tributes poured in upon the news of Douglass’s retirement. As one alumna wrote, “N.J.C. just never will mean as much without you there to those of us who were fortunate enough to be students when the college was small and we could learn to know you so intimately and to love you so much. My greatest hope for the future of ‘N.J.C.’ is that its beautiful spirit of friendship, loyalty, cooperation, courage and faith that you created and with which the students were imbued with live on forever.” In the years leading up to her retirement, Douglass received many honors. In 1931, she became the first woman ever to receive the Columbia University Medal, and in 1932, she was made an Officier d’Académie by the French government in appreciation of her influence in the teaching of French. She had received an honorary doctor of laws from Rutgers in 1924 and received a second honorary doctorate from Russell Sage College in 1932. She had been appointed twice to the New Jersey State Board of Education.

After her release from Four Winds, Douglass spent the remainder of the summer 1933 with her daughter, Edith, at Onondaga, the Adirondack camp that she owned on the west shore of Lake Placid. On the afternoon of September 21, the day before she and Edith were scheduled to return to New Jersey, Mabel Smith Douglass rowed across the lake in a small boat. Later that afternoon, when she did not return and the boat was spotted drifting empty, Edith reported her as missing. The local police and divers searched the area, dragged the lake, and even set off dynamite to try to raise the body, but ultimately had to give up; Douglass was presumed drowned. The college held a memorial service for Mabel Smith Douglass in the Voorhees Chapel on October 29, 1933. The Associate Alumnae organized a campaign to establish a scholarship in her memory (the Mabel Smith Douglass Graduate Fellowship), and Douglass’s old Jersey City friend Mrs. Alvoni Allen commissioned local sculptor Archimedes A. Giacomantonio to create a bronze bust of the late dean. In February 1936, the Associate Alumnae dedicated a set of chimes and a bronze tablet in Mabel Smith Douglass’s honor.

Mabel Smith Douglass’s death remained something of a mystery for thirty years, until September 15, 1963, when two recreational divers exploring the lake bottom discovered the well-preserved body of a woman dressed in old-fashioned clothes. The body was soon identified as Mabel Smith Douglass. The resulting inquest again attributed her death to an accident, despite the fact that the remains of a rope were found around her neck. According to the police report, “The investigation does reflect ill health and an extreme nervous condition of Mrs. Douglass; but since positive factual evidence is lacking, and the rope the skin divers saw around the neck disintegrated when touched, examination of a knot or accidental entanglement in an anchor rope cannot be determined.” By this time, Douglass no longer had any living relatives. Her daughter, Edith Douglass, had moved to New York City and worked in the insurance industry before marrying Swiss diplomatic courier Max Albert Roth in March 1943. Tragically, Max Roth was killed in a plane crash in Europe only four months after the
wedding. Edith Douglass Roth herself committed suicide, jumping from an eighth-story window in Manhattan on April 30, 1948. In the absence of other family, the college took responsibility for Mabel Smith Douglass’s burial in Green-Wood Cemetery beside her husband, son, and daughter.

Taking into consideration Mabel Smith Douglass’s family history and illness and the circumstances of her death, it is likely that she committed suicide. In 1933, suicide was considered shameful, so it was kept quiet. As George Ortloff writes in his rather sensationalized account of Douglass’s disappearance and death, “In the final analysis, whether Mrs. Douglass’s death was an accident—as the coroner ruled—or a suicide, doesn’t matter. What really matters is that she was born and lived for 56 years before that last day of summer on which she died, and that in the interim, she left the world a better place for having passed through it.”

**Margaret Trumbull Corwin**

The credit for bringing the New Jersey College for Women through the Great Depression and World War II must be given to Margaret Trumbull Corwin, who became dean in January 1934. A descendant of an English family that had arrived in Massachusetts in 1633, Corwin was born in Philadelphia in 1889. Her family moved to New Haven, Connecticut, where her father, Robert Nelson Corwin, became professor of German at Yale University and served as chairman of the Board of Admissions from 1920 to 1933. Margaret graduated from New Haven High School and, like Mabel Smith Douglass, attended a Seven Sisters College, Bryn Mawr, where she majored in German and minored in French. Like her father, Margaret Corwin loved German literature and culture and visited the country many times. After graduating Phi Beta Kappa in 1912, Corwin worked at Yale University Press. During World War I, she was granted a leave of absence to serve as the executive secretary of the Connecticut Women’s Committee of the Council for National Defense, and in 1918, she was sent to Beaune, France, by the YMCA. From 1919 until accepting the position at NJC, she served as executive secretary of Yale University Graduate School. Like Douglass, she was an active clubwoman, primarily through the American Association of University Women (AAUW). She became director of the North Atlantic Section of the association from 1924 to 1928, and in 1930 was AAUW delegate to the council meeting of the International Federation of University Women (IFUW) in Prague. Douglass also participated in the IFUW through her Barnard friend Virginia Gildersleeve. As was Douglass, Corwin was a world traveler; she visited China under the auspices of Yale Graduate School and later traveled extensively through her appointment as convener of the IFUW Exchange Committee from 1937 to 1947 and assistant treasurer from 1947 to 1950.

Upon her arrival at NJC in 1934, Corwin found a college deeply in debt. The financial crisis came to a head in 1936. At the November Trustees Committee meeting, which Robert Clothier chaired in Leonor Loree’s absence, the president stated, “The
University is confronted with a financial problem of increasing seriousness arising out of the indebtedness of the College for Women. NJC owed almost a million dollars. Clothier decided that the university comptroller would take over the college’s finances and immediately introduce various economy measures. Clothier himself became chair of the Trustees Committee, whose authority over property, funds, and nonacademic employees was rescinded. Loree’s longtime lieutenant, Alfred Henderson, took a leave of absence and then resigned. In 1937, the bulk of NJC’s debt was refinanced on favorable terms with a loan of six hundred thousand dollars from an insurance company. Loree himself resigned in early 1938.

From then on, Corwin served as a liaison between the college and the university. In spite of a certain amount of friction with the university comptroller, she was able to work fairly harmoniously with Clothier, whose term in office (1932–1951) would roughly parallel her own. In her internal management of the college, Corwin tended to operate more through faculty and administrative committees than had Dean Douglass. She worked closely with faculty, administration, and alumnae to curb costs while maintaining standards. Among other measures, Corwin launched a recruitment drive to
keep up student numbers. In 1934, she appointed Lillian Gardner as assistant in public information to help lure prospective students to the college. The first Pre-College Guidance Conference at NJC in that year brought 317 high school juniors and seniors to the campus. Under Corwin, enrollment stabilized and admissions standards rose; in the late 1930s, 95 percent of the freshmen were in the upper half of their high school graduating class, and 80 percent were in the top quarter. Several students recalled Corwin as a "very gray-looking lady." "She always wore gray or blue. Gray stockings and gray shoes." Apparently she was a poor public speaker who "would trip over her words. . . . It was painful to listen to her." Under Corwin, the NJC curriculum was reorganized in a more rational and practical way. In 1928, the general requirements for each major had been abolished and replaced by thirteen separate academic tracks that caused considerable confusion. In 1934, Corwin reinstated the general requirements, which specified a certain number of courses in humanities, foreign languages, sciences, and social sciences for each student. Several specialized programs were abolished, leaving agriculture, home economics, physical education, and pre-medical training. Agriculture was later replaced by a combination of NJC and College of Agriculture courses. An honors program—two years of independent study with a faculty member followed by comprehensive exams—had been introduced in a few departments in 1928 but was not functioning when Corwin arrived. In its place, she introduced graduation with distinction, later known as graduation with honors. Despite the financial challenges, Margaret Corwin and her administration undertook several new curricular initiatives during the 1930s. Seeing the economy crumbling around them, students were increasingly interested in economics and sociology. Several new faculty members were appointed in this area, among them Francis W. Hopkins, who took over the chairmanship of the Department of Economics and Sociology from Eugene E. Agger of Rutgers in 1932 and remained for thirty years, and Miriam E. West, a specialist in labor problems. In 1935, Corwin appointed Professor Eleanor Flynn, whose "courses in Sociology, contacts with the social agencies of the state and wise counsel to students interested in social work have done much to meet an evident need." In 1936, with a grant from the Carnegie Corporation, Corwin introduced a Social Information Center, which assembled data on social welfare programs, and encouraged students to volunteer at agencies in New Brunswick. Under Flynn's leadership, one of the cottages was transformed into a small settlement, known as the Jane Addams House, which sponsored programs for local children and served as a laboratory for sociology students. In establishing the Jane Addams House, NJC followed the example of many other women's colleges that founded settlement houses during the early twentieth century.

Social work was one of several vocationally oriented programs that became popular at NJC in the 1930s. During the decade, interest shifted from modern languages and English towards the social sciences, with one-quarter of the students in the professional
departments by the late 1930s, as opposed to just under one-fifth (in home economics) in 1924. As early as 1930, the college had introduced noncredit classes in typing, stenography, and shorthand “so students could be prepared for positions requiring these skills.” With the decline in teaching opportunities during the 1930s, college women increasingly looked for positions in business, librarianship, home economics, and other fields. In 1936, the NJC trustees approved a bachelor of science in nursing education in cooperation with Christ’s Hospital in Jersey City. Although this plan did not prove practicable, the college established a two-year pre-nursing course where students could transfer to Columbia University to complete the five-year program.

In a modest way, Margaret Corwin began to encourage the faculty to conduct scholarly research and publish. Like Mabel Smith Douglass, Corwin fundamentally believed that the primary mission of NJC was to educate undergraduates, but her outlook was more flexible and practical. When the Rutgers Graduate Faculty was established in 1932, the NJC Trustees Committee decreed that “the College for Women will not engage in graduate work now or in the future. Professors will be eligible for seats on the Graduate Faculty. With permission of the dean, professors can teach graduate courses up to 25 percent of their time through extension, summer session, etc. Permission can be withdrawn if work suffers.” By 1938, Corwin presented an urgent plea that means be found “to aid the faculty of this College to continue scholarly research in order that they may make contributions in their respective fields, and in order that they may come back to the classroom refreshed and inspired.” The Trustees Committee was discussing a request from history professor Margaret Judson, who had received a research fellowship from Mount Holyoke College, for a sabbatical with partial pay. Judson was ultimately granted the sabbatical, which enabled her to spend a year doing primary research for Crisis of the Constitution (1949), her masterful work on the English Civil War. She later wrote, however, that Corwin was reluctant to reduce her hours of undergraduate teaching or to allow her to teach graduate students. Only in the early 1950s did Judson begin to teach graduate courses through the support of young faculty members at Rutgers College.

In the mid-1930s, Rutgers’s financial situation improved. The state appropriation began to increase again, reaching the pre-1932 level in 1936, enabling salary cuts to be restored. From March 1934, funding became available through the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) to employ two hundred men and women students at various tasks for as much as fifteen dollars a month. The establishment of the National Youth Administration in 1935 expanded the program and placed it on a continuing basis. Federal funds were distributed through NJC’s Personnel Bureau, which in 1937 also introduced a yearly vocational conference designed to encourage students to remain in college. Part of the state aid took the form of full-tuition scholarships, which, beginning in 1937, were awarded to NJC students on the basis of financial need, personal qualifications, and academic merit. In that year, NJC received a major windfall from the estate of former trustee James Neilson. A bequest of fifty thousand dollars was
put aside for student loans. Neilson’s mansion, Woodlawn, became a base for the Associate Alumnae. Rooms were also rented to groups and overnight visitors.⁷¹

Even with increased scholarship aid, life for many students of the 1930s was still hard. Alma Geist from Califon, New Jersey, had wanted to attend Antioch College in Ohio but won the NJC Hickman History Scholarship in 1934. In spite of her scholarship, she had to work as a waitress in the dining hall and type papers for other students at ten cents a page. At the end of her junior year, a physical examination revealed a slight curvature in her spine reputedly from carrying heavy trays, so she was given a job as a professor’s assistant.⁷²

**Changing Demographics**

The 1930s was marked by continuing tensions over the increasing numbers of Jewish applicants to Rutgers and NJC. In the early 1930s, in response to complaints from Jewish community leaders in New Brunswick, the percentage of Jewish students at both colleges increased. Like Mabel Smith Douglass, however, Margaret Corwin and the Trustees Committee put into place policies like the limitation of commuters to 25 percent of the student body, which effectively restricted the number of Jewish women.⁷³ Corwin and her advisers claimed that library and classroom space was inadequate to accommodate more commuters.⁷⁴ At the same time, they tried to recruit students from outside New Jersey, establishing new competitive scholarships based on College Board examinations, psychological tests, general character, personality, and financial need (in that order). Four regional scholarships with similar criteria were introduced “to encourage students from areas not in the immediate vicinity of the college.”⁷⁵ Many Jewish families lived in New Brunswick and other urban areas within commuting distance. Ida Perlmutter from the Class of 1938 commuted to NJC from South River. She recalled that all the girls she knew at NJC were Jewish and a group rode the bus together every day.⁷⁶

Margaret Corwin was likely influenced by her father’s experience as head of admissions at Yale at a time when she herself was also working in the Yale administration. Apparently Robert Corwin was one of the first administrators to suggest limiting Jewish numbers at Yale. He referred to the growing number of young Jewish men who commuted to Yale from New Haven as an “alien and unwashed element.” In 1924, Yale limited Jewish admissions at 10 percent, a quota that would stay in place for four decades.⁷⁷ In a similar vein, Frieda Finklestein (NJC ’41) came to NJC when she was told that the Jewish quota at Smith College was filled and she was put on a waiting list.⁷⁸ Annette Greenblatt (NJC ’45), an outstanding student from Vineland, was rejected by NJC initially. “When I applied to NJC, I was rejected, and my English teacher, whose name was Jane (Beakley?), at the time, was so infuriated that she went up to the school to speak to the admissions officer and told him that she knew why I hadn’t been accepted, and that it was a state school, and that he had no right to do that, and that’s how I went to NJC.”⁷⁹ Other Jewish students of the 1930s complained about being
expected to eat non-kosher food in the dining hall (the only alternative was cornflakes), and an orientation being scheduled on the Rosh Hashanah holiday.  

Discrimination against African American students was even more overt. In 1934, the first known African American student, Julia Baxter Bates, arrived at NJC. Julia Baxter was a light-skinned black woman who grew up in the predominantly white community of Bernardsville, New Jersey. Her grandfather was Newark's first African American school principal and her father and aunt founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) chapters in Morristown and Newark. Baxter, who wanted to be a teacher, applied to NJC in 1934 with the required photograph and was provisionally accepted. When she came to NJC for an interview, however, it became clear that she had been mistaken for white, because she was told that “she would be more comfortable” in a black college. Of the small percentage of African American students who attended college at that time, the vast majority attended black colleges (later known as historically black colleges and universities).

Baxter, however, insisted that she had been accepted at NJC and had the right to attend. Through her activist family, she was probably aware that the NAACP was pursuing several cases of discrimination in higher education as part of mounting legal challenges to the Plessy doctrine of “separate but equal.” The admissions officer who interviewed her appealed to Corwin, who brought the matter to President Clothier:

I can’t see how we at a college with state subsidy could refuse to take a negro girl. Rutgers has taken negro students, and Smith [and] Radcliffe have had many. Bryn Mawr has had one or two pretty lonely souls I fear. I’m afraid this Bernardsville girl would be lonely too, but if she cannot be dissuaded, I think we must consider her application on its merits. I feel . . . that she would probably be happier commuting. I’d ever so much like your reaction in the matter. It isn’t going to appeal to the Southerners in our Dean of Women staff.

Baxter was admitted to NJC, but she was denied the right to live on campus, instead staying with family in Newark and commuting to NJC by train. She graduated with a degree in English but was unable to find work as a teacher because of her race. Ultimately, Julia Baxter Bates found a position at the NAACP headquarters in New York, serving twenty years as national director of research and information. During the 1950s, Bates researched and coauthored the winning brief in the historic Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas decision, which the NAACP used to prove the scientific case against segregation in the nation’s public schools in the U.S. Supreme Court. The next known African American women to attend NJC were Lydia Benning Moss (NJC ’42) and Constance Virginia Andrews (NJC ’45). The experience of black women at NJC during this period was similar to that documented by Linda Perkins in her study of African American women at the Seven Sisters colleges that Margaret Corwin, like Mabel Smith Douglass, attended and emulated. Perkins finds about five hundred black women
Student Life in the Depression Decade

Like their peers throughout the country, NJC students became increasingly engaged in politics during the 1930s. Observing the economic upheavals going on around them, students sought to understand and effect social and political change. The NJC branch of the League of Women Voters, founded in 1927, became more active. In 1935, for the first time the NJC branch was invited to send representatives to the Model Senate conference at Vassar College. Theresa Kunst (NJC ’35), the branch president, wrote excitedly in her diary, “The conference was run very smoothly. The delegates were an extremely intelligent group. Oh did they know government upside down and inside out!!!!” The following year the conference was held at NJC, bringing delegates from thirty colleges to campus for three days.

Lecture evenings were exciting campus events at both NJC and Rutgers College. Prominent women like radical English professor Vida Scudder of Wellesley were invited to NJC to give lectures, while Eleanor Roosevelt spoke at the college on three different occasions. NJC students also attended events at the men’s college, where the Rutgers Forum, organized in 1930, conducted meetings throughout the year on subjects such as political science, economics, and current events.
as conscription, censorship, and socialism. The Rutgers Liberal Club, often in cooperation with such groups as the Rutgers Christian Association, the League for Independent Political Action, the League for Industrial Democracy, and the local branch of the Socialist Party, arranged a popular series of lectures that featured such speakers as Communist Party of the USA secretary Earl Browder; American Socialist Party leader Norman Thomas; antiwar activist, socialist, and communist Scott Nearing; and socialist and writer Harry W. Laidler.⁸⁹ In a political poll of the NJC senior class in 1934, the Socialist Party drew the highest numbers of votes.⁹⁰

As economic concerns were replaced by the threat of fascism in Europe and the fear of war, many students at both Rutgers and NJC became involved in the peace movement. The compulsory Army Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) at Rutgers College was attacked and various types of peace pledges were circulated.⁹¹ At Rutgers, Emily Hickman of the history department, herself a leader in the moderate Committee on the Cause and Cure of War, organized a Peace Club, which sponsored speakers, held discussion groups, and organized international nights.⁹² NJC women also participated actively in the national student peace movement, a key component of the larger student protest movement of the 1930s. The student rebels of the depression era have been called “the most effective radical organizers in the history of American student politics.”⁹³ On April 13, 1934, the anniversary of the day that the United States entered World War I, the National Student League and the student arm of the League for Industrial Democracy held the first National Strike against War. Nationwide twenty-five thousand college students walked out of class for one hour to hold peace assemblies. The strike in 1935 was far larger, drawing 175,000 students.⁹⁴ At Rutgers, several hundred students assembled peacefully at the New Brunswick Theological Seminary on the Rutgers College campus. Theresa Kunst wrote in her diary, “This morning at 11 we had our strike for peace. A couple hundred of us went down to Rutgers—10 of us went in Aimée’s little five seater ford! The main meeting was indoors because of the rain. The big lesson learned was ‘wage peace’! as those interested in war are waging war!!”⁹⁵ The following year, 1936, when around 500,000 participated in the strike nationally, the NJC Peace Club organized an alternative event in the Voorhees Chapel.⁹⁶

Coinciding with the Peace Strike, NJC and Rutgers were rocked by a serious controversy that became known as the Bergel-Hauptmann affair.⁹⁷ In the spring of 1933, Friedrich Hauptmann, chair of the NJC German department, informed Acting Dean Albert Meder that he did not recommend promoting Lienhard Bergel, a young instructor who had been at NJC since early 1932. As was customary, Meder supported the chairman’s recommendation, which was communicated to Bergel in September, although he was allowed until spring 1935 to find another position. In the economic conditions of the early 1930s, junior faculty members were frequently let go, and Bergel’s dismissal would have been unremarkable had not it occurred against the background of Adolf Hitler’s accession to power in Germany in January 1933. German-born Hauptmann was cautiously supportive of the new Nazi government, while Bergel,
also German born, was an outspoken opponent of Nazism. After his nonreappointment was confirmed by Margaret Corwin in 1934, Bergel began to assert publicly that he had been dismissed because of his political views. The controversy escalated through the 1934 and 1935 academic years, with Bergel garnering support from students, New Jersey legislators, the Jewish community, and the American Civil Liberties Union, while Hauptmann was supported by most of the students living in the German House and various Rutgers administrators. As the Red Scare escalated on college campuses in the mid-1930s, Bergel’s supporters were tarred with accusations of communism.98 Theresa Kunst, who knew both men, emerged as a leader of the pro-Bergel faction at NJC. She was concerned, however, about the impact of the leftist groups supporting Bergel, writing in her diary:

Cut cooking lecture after lunch & went to the “red den”—fighting for Bergel’s retention. They were going to have a mass meeting in town—the League against War & Fascism, the National Student League, the Young Communist League, the Liberal Club, some NJ.Cers, etc.—which Bergel would have been blamed for. . . . I told them they were “dopes” for bringing them to the meeting . . . that Clothier would merely have to make a statement to the press that the agitation was merely a “red problem”—Finally, I convinced them to hold off.99

When the conflict reached the national press in May 1935, President Clothier took the extraordinary step of charging a special committee of the Board of Trustees, chaired by Edward Ashmead, to investigate the allegations. From May to late July 1935, the committee heard the testimony of witnesses from both sides, including dozens of NJC students and faculty. Theresa Kunst approached her turn at the witness stand with trepidation: “I felt as if I were going to my execution.”100 The Ashmead Committee’s final report, issued on August 18, 1935, supported the NJC administration’s decision not to reappoint Bergel and found no evidence of political bias on Hauptmann’s part. After two years of unemployment, Lienhard Bergel was appointed at the newly founded Queens College in New York where he went on to have a distinguished career in comparative literature. Hauptmann disappeared in November 1940. He was later discovered to have returned to Germany, where he joined the Nazi Party and was given a position as chief of the German Academy in Slovakia.101

As well as protesting against fascism abroad, the student radicals of the 1930s advocated for free speech and greater democracy on their home campuses.102 Theresa Kunst and the editors of NJC’s Campus News were among the student leaders at the forefront of these campaigns at Rutgers. As in the 1920s, NJC students chafed against college rules and regulations. Students particularly objected to compulsory chapel, which was still held four days a week and on Sundays. There were numerous complaints about poor student attendance and talking during chapel. In 1935, weekday services were reduced to a semi-religious service with a guest speaker on Tuesdays and a secular
assembly on Fridays, while Sunday services were discontinued except for an occasional vespers.\textsuperscript{103} Tuesday program topics from the 1930s included “The History and Liturgy of the Moravian Church,” “Catholic Thought Today,” “New Types of Mission Work,” and “Jewish Thought Today.”\textsuperscript{104} Commuters were apparently not required to attend.\textsuperscript{105} Some students still complained. According to an editorial in \textit{Campus News}, “A spiritual need exists only if the individual feels this need. There can be no group need for an institutionalized religion. . . . Then we have regimentation of thought.” In contrast, Adela de Marcus Zagoren (NJC ’40), who was Jewish, enjoyed chapel: “One of the Chapel sessions was sort of ecumenical with a wonderful speaker and the other was sort of religious and spiritual.”\textsuperscript{106} Two campus polls came out in favor of retaining compulsory weekday religious services, which remained until 1945, when Rutgers and all its divisions became the official state university of New Jersey.\textsuperscript{107}

With the background of growing fascist influence in Europe, NJC students were sensitive to any policy that seemed undemocratic. As Theresa Kunst frequently wrote in her diary, “Democratic gov’t here at college. That’s a laugh!”\textsuperscript{108} One example was the so-called seniors on the stairs controversy. At the yearly Yule Log ceremony, twenty-eight seniors were traditionally chosen by the dean to stand on a specially constructed staircase in the Voorhees Chapel. The ceremony, including the names of students honored, was actually covered by the \textit{New York Times}.\textsuperscript{109} The selection criteria, however, were unclear. A flurry of editorials and letters in \textit{Campus News} critiqued the practice. According to a 1938 editorial titled “Democracy?”:

\begin{quote}
The difficulty of making any concrete suggestions for a change in this method of selection, [chosen by several members of administration] with which there was considerable dissatisfaction within the student body, was evident when discussion showed that opposition to the present method was based on a number of reasons. Perhaps the two most important were whether individuals who were not qualified by close acquaintance with the seniors could be fairly called upon to judge their intangible qualities, also whether the practice of setting up certain qualities as superior and then honoring these girls to whom certain individuals attributed these qualities was not questionable.\textsuperscript{110}
\end{quote}

In 1939, Dean Corwin, while refusing to change the method of selection, invited the students to vote on whether to eliminate the staircase part of the ceremony. The close vote was in favor of removing it, although it was reinstated several years after World War II upon student request.\textsuperscript{111} Corwin had cleverly used the students’ own faith in democratic processes to resolve the issue.

The constant critique of the college administration in \textit{Campus News} eventually wore out the patience of Margaret Corwin and her advisers. During the Bergel-Hauptmann controversy, Albert Meder, the newspaper’s faculty adviser, had instructed editor Marion Short not to print letters by students and alumnae about Bergel’s dismissal and
their experience in both professors’ classes. Short believed, however, that she had an obligation to display student opinion. The incident marked the beginning of the tension between *Campus News* and the administration, which led Corwin to appoint a committee in October 1936 to investigate the relationship of the student newspaper with the college. This committee discovered that in March 1936, without consulting the administration, the newspaper had changed its 1928 constitution to weaken the role of the faculty adviser. Strongly committed to freedom of the press, the editors believed that the newspaper should represent the views of the student body and its democratically elected board of editors without interference from the administration.  

The committee completed its study in November 1937, marking the beginning of a protracted negotiation between the *Campus News* editors, Corwin, and the NJC Trustees Committee over the status and structure of the newspaper. The student editors wanted to adopt a model in which the newspaper would relinquish its support from student fees in return for greater independence. The administration’s position was that regardless of its means of support, the newspaper still represented NJC and thus the administration wanted to oversee the budget and to approve the nomination of
CHALLENGES OF THE 1930s

On March 22, 1940, when the editors refused to accept an ultimatum from the administration, Corwin informed the student body that *Campus News* would no longer serve as the college’s undergraduate newspaper and that the administration would view any attempt to publish the newspaper “as a desire to resign from membership in the college.”

The abolition of *Campus News* attracted attention on other campuses. The *Daily Princetonian* supported the NJC editors, as did the Rutgers College newspaper, the *Targum*. The New Jersey Civil Liberties Union sent Corwin a letter, as did the National Student Federation of America—the umbrella organization for student governments—and many alumnae. Censorship of college newspapers was widespread in the 1930s, with major incidents at City College of New York and Columbia, among others. NJC was without a student newspaper for nearly a year until the launch of the *Caellian* in February 1941. The *Campus News* editors of the 1930s were actually ahead of their time in that later many college newspapers, including the *Targum*, became independent.

Despite the tensions of the depression years, students of the 1930s remained engaged in traditional activities. Rutgers historian Richard P. McCormick noted that there were more campus activities during the thirties because students had no money to go elsewhere. President Clothier and Dean Corwin founded the popular Freshmen Reception, which brought Rutgers men and NJC women together. Audrey Brown (NJC ’38), a commuter from Metuchen, met her future husband at the first freshmen reception in 1934 and they remained together from then on. At formal balls, students danced to the big bands of Tommy Dorsey, Hal Kemp, and Duke Ellington. Informal dances were held at NJC and Rutgers almost every weekend. With the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, bars like the Corner Tavern on Easton Avenue became busy watering spots. By far the most popular pastime, however, was the movies. In the 1930s, New Brunswick had at least four downtown cinemas: Walter Reade’s State Theatre, the Rivoli, the Strand, and the Bijou. Helen Erickson (NJC ’31) recalled that when films ran past the NJC curfew, those forced to leave relied on commuters like herself to tell them the endings the next day. Some students like Isolde Musterman (NJC ’34) still managed to get to New York, going to Carnegie Hall and to the Metropolitan Opera with the Art and Music Club. Guest artists like Isaac Stern and the West Point Choir gave concerts at Rutgers. New student clubs and organizations appeared at NJC and Rutgers in the 1930s. Although team sports were declining at NJC during this period, students increasingly pursued individual sports like swimming, fencing, and archery. Modern dance remained popular with the establishment of a dance group, Orchesis.

The 1930s at NJC was a decade of retrenchment and consolidation. Faced with economic hardship, many students struggled to continue their education and find employment after graduation. In response to the economic crisis, the college administration sought sources of financial support for students and engaged more actively in
recruitment and fund-raising. More vocationally oriented subjects, career guidance, and placement were offered with an eye toward the difficult job market. The young college experienced additional challenges in the loss of its dynamic founding dean, and tensions between the college, Rutgers University, and the state of New Jersey were exacerbated by economic hardship. As the international situation deteriorated, NJC students and faculty became more politically aware and participated in the debates, demonstrations, and controversies of the time. The Bergel-Hauptmann affair and the *Campus News* controversy produced serious divisions in the NJC family. By the end of the decade, however, the onset of World War II brought forth a new atmosphere on the campus, as students, faculty, and administration bonded in the face of a common enemy.\(^\text{122}\)