The Douglass Century

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The decade of the 1940s was a watershed era for the United States. U.S. participation in World War II (1941–1945) transformed the country militarily, politically, economically, and emotionally. With Europe devastated, the United States emerged from the war as a great power, although at a price of more than four hundred thousand American military and civilian lives lost.1 American women participated actively in the war effort, both on the home front and in the new women’s services first established in 1942, the Women’s Army Corps (WAC), the Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service (WAVES), the SPARS (Coast Guard), and the Women Marines.2 On the home front, millions of women labored in war-related industrial and clerical jobs, taking the places of men who were serving in the armed forces, leading to an overall expansion of the female labor force from twelve million in 1940 to eighteen million in 1945.3 Countless other women volunteered, planting gardens, rolling bandages, working in canteens, serving as air raid wardens, spotting airplanes, raising funds, collecting scrap metal, and carrying out dozens of other war-related tasks. At the same time, women kept families together in the absence of fathers, husbands, sons, and brothers, while dealing with rationing, shortages, and inflation. Black women did not participate equally in the new occupations that the war opened for women; they faced continuing employment discrimination and segregation. Overall, however, the war presented many new opportunities for women in roles previously restricted to men, although these gains did not necessarily extend beyond the term of the conflict.4

World War II had a profound effect on higher education. The American Council of Education (ACE), founded in 1918, served as a spokesperson for higher education during the war. Beginning in 1939, under the leadership of President George F. Zook, the ACE organized a series of higher education conferences, aggressively advocating the
role that colleges and universities could play in the war effort. Most dramatically, colleges and universities were rapidly depleted as male students joined the armed services, although new opportunities were created for women at some previously all-male institutions like the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in New York and Stonehill College in Massachusetts, which were forced to accept women students. The financial impact was mitigated at hundreds of institutions (including Rutgers) by participation in college training programs conducted by the army, navy, and army air force. The ACE issued a statement in January 1942 upholding academic freedom during wartime; colleges and universities did not experience the attacks on Germans, Italians, and German-language teaching that were seen during World War I. In the long term, the effect of World War II on universities was positive, contributing to the expansion of higher education opportunities and enhanced federal support for research.

Women’s colleges, of course, were not as severely affected by the war as were men’s colleges and coeducational institutions. Nevertheless, the New Jersey College for Women, like other women’s colleges, faced new challenges during World War II. Students, faculty, and staff participated actively in the war effort. The war presented new opportunities for students and graduates to work in industry or serve in the military. At the same time, all suffered from fear and anxiety as they witnessed the myriad tragedies of the war years. After 1945, the campus gradually returned to normal. Women students in the immediate postwar years received mixed messages about the relative importance of marriage, family life, and careers. While many NJC graduates took the traditional path of marrying and staying at home to care for children, the impact of the war years was not soon forgotten.

**Early War Years**

As the yearbook editors wrote, 1939 to 1940 was not only “a social year. It was a political year.” With the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939, the student leaders of the peace movement that had flourished during the 1930s were divided. Two new organizations emerged on campus, the Committee for the Support of the Allies and the Anti-War Committee. The Committee for the Support of the Allies favored sending aid to Britain while the Anti-War Committee feared that assisting Britain would lead to the United States’ greater involvement in the war. Both groups held lectures, fund-raisers, and rallies in support of their respective positions. According to NJC history professor and college historian George P. Schmidt, “Though the two groups engaged in some lively discussions, their clashes did not produce any deep divisions of opinion in the College for Women.” Together with Rutgers College students, NJC students continued to participate in the nationwide April rally for peace until the United States entered the war. In February 1941, a new student newspaper, the *Caellian*, replaced the banished *Campus News* after a one-year hiatus when NJC had no student newspaper. Caelian or Caellian is the name of the southernmost hill of the seven hills of Rome, continuing the classical theme of naming student spaces at NJC.
During the first year of the war, small adjustments and changes in curriculum were made. The faculty undertook a course of lectures on the background of the war. Many students were looking ahead to wartime needs in science and industry. In her 1940 annual report, Corwin noted that enrollment in chemistry, mathematics, and physics had all gone up significantly in the past five years, a trend that was also reported at Harvard and Yale. Remarking that these were “subjects for which women students have no especial aptitude,” Corwin reaffirmed her commitment to the liberal arts: “The liberal arts college, symbol of the democratic freedom for which the U.S.A. has stood consistently since the days of the pilgrim fathers, must show whether it is still sound.”

Corwin’s thinking would evolve as NJC students were called on to study science and mathematics to meet the demands of the war industry.

By the fall of 1940, after a horrifying spring and summer in which Hitler overran one European country after another, NJC faculty and students were actively engaged in defense work. In early autumn, Corwin appointed a Red Cross Committee of faculty and students under the chairmanship of Helen Hazen, professor of home economics. She introduced a program of knitting garments for British soldiers and sewing items for refugees and classes in home hygiene and first aid taught by members of the staff, which led to a Red Cross Certificate. The Red Cross program proved to be very popular and increased students’ awareness of the international situation.

In December, Corwin expanded the program, creating the Committee on Defense and Relief Work under the chairmanship of Professor Margaret Judson. In founding this committee, Corwin was following the lead of her peers at other women’s colleges, who had established the Committee on Women in College and Defense in the fall of 1940. The chair, Meta Glass, was the president of Sweet Briar College and, like Corwin, a leader in the American Association of University Women. The NJC committee developed a three-pronged approach: as well as continuing and expanding the existing relief program, it inaugurated defense work on campus and a series of noncredit courses. Money was raised for relief organizations, among them the British War Relief Society, American Friends Service, United China Relief Fund, the Greek War Relief Association, and the Finnish Relief Fund. Student-faculty bridge games, an alumnae food sale, and a faculty review that became a tradition for several years were a few of the fundraisers held. Among the classes, a course in auto mechanics proved to be the most popular, with over 400 students attempting to enroll for 162 places. The purpose of the course was to “help people to be equipped to care for their own car should they need to drive at times when a service station and garage mechanics are not available.” Pearl Paterson Thompson (NJC ’41) recalled, “I took one look at all that dirty gunk under the hood and decided I would join the Navy. It was a lot cleaner.”

In April 1941, Emily Hickman, chair of the Education Subcommittee, organized a series of lectures on the world situation, culminating in a speech by theologian and ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr of the Union Theological Seminary. Margaret Judson took particular pride in the lecture series, the purpose of which was “to present the college
community the nature of the world crisis and the various ways in which that crisis has created and will create a defense problem for the United States. It is evident that probably a majority of the students, and perhaps some of the faculty, are not really informed on the nature of the present crisis.  

Across town at Rutgers College, preparation for war was under way. In September 1939, a unit of the Civic Pilot Training Program was established at Rutgers, which provided basic flight instruction for two hundred students. This program was open to women, but because of the required background in mathematics and physics, few applied. With the passing of the Selective Service Act in October 1940, several hundred Rutgers students aged twenty-one and over registered for the draft. In January 1941, the College of Engineering, in association with the Extension division, launched the federally funded program, Engineering, Science, and Management War Training, which offered short courses in engineering. Established by Congress in 1940, this program offered free college-level courses in engineering, physics, chemistry, mathematics,
and other defense-related subjects to both men and women. By the end of the war, more than 282,000 women had been enrolled at sites throughout the country.20

Because the Army Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) was compulsory at Rutgers College, it was noticeable when the army began to expand and increasing numbers of advanced ROTC cadets went on active duty. Male enrollment dropped about 8 percent when the academic year began in September 1941.21 Bernice Adler (NJC ’41) met her future husband, who was a year ahead of her, in the second semester of her freshman year. She and her friends were aware that the young ROTC men would be among the first to be called up.22

**The United States Enters the War**

The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, followed by Franklin D. Roosevelt’s declaration of war on December 11, brought sweeping changes to Rutgers and NJC. Ruth Sheeler (NJC ’43) was pinned to a fraternity man and fellow Bridgeton resident, Bill Moncrief, who would become her husband. Bill was in advanced ROTC and would graduate in 1942 as a first lieutenant. She was at NJC when someone heard the news on the radio. “That news spread like wildfire.” She recalled that “all the boys came over and commiserated with all the girls and talked about it and it was very upsetting and very exciting.”23 Barbara Waters (NJC ’42) recalled that on Pearl Harbor Day, she was visiting her fiancé, Vince Kramer, who had graduated the previous spring and joined the marines. “He . . . was home, in Paterson, when it happened. Who could forget? . . . Yes, we were in the car, somewhere in Paterson, I remember. Had the radio on. So he had to dash right back to Quantico.”24 Since the attack occurred on a weekend, many NJC students were at home with their families when they heard the news. It was close to the end of the semester, so all waited with trepidation for what the new year would bring.

In January 1942, Dean Corwin and President Clothier attended an emergency meeting of college and university presidents sponsored by the ACE. There were few recommendations, however, for women’s colleges apart from reiterating the importance of the liberal arts. Corwin was frustrated, noting that almost all the suggestions were applicable to only male students: “To the representatives of the colleges for women it was especially baffling to discover how little woman-power had been considered as an element in the man-power which was clearly so urgently needed.”25 In fact, at the end of the conference’s first day, several members of the Committee on Women in College and Defense and others interested in women’s education convened separately to discuss the role of women’s students in the war effort.26 Corwin continued to attend meetings of the committee throughout the duration.

At the men’s colleges, President Clothier urged the students to remain calm and wait for further direction. The second term was shortened by five weeks and an expanded summer session was introduced to enable students to graduate in three years. When the 1942 academic year opened, Rutgers College welcomed the largest freshman class in
the college’s history, while the junior and senior classes had lost more than a quarter of their members. With the reduction of the draft age to eighteen, however, the situation changed drastically. Students rapidly withdrew and by May 1943, there were fewer than eight hundred undergraduates remaining in the men’s colleges. Rutgers would have been in serious financial trouble had it not already been chosen as an Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) site. The first group arrived in March 1943 and soon the college was once again overflowing with students, albeit uniformed ones. These students were selected from enlisted personnel on the basis of test scores and educational background. One group received training in engineering, another studied languages, while a later group took pre-medical and pre-dental courses. By April 1944, enrollment once again plummeted by one-third when the soldiers were withdrawn in preparation for the invasion of France. They were soon replaced, however, by participants in the Army Specialized Training Reserve Program (ASTRP), high school graduates who had not yet reached the age of eighteen who were enrolled and continued studying before being drafted. By early 1945, there were over four hundred young men attending classes in English, history, geography, mathematics, and science. Overall Rutgers educated nearly four thousand ASTP and ASTRP enlistees during World War II. 

**Impact of the War on Academics at NJC**

These war upheavals completely disrupted the curriculum at the men’s colleges. Faculty members struggled to teach unfamiliar courses. The small number of civilian upper-classmen who remained had trouble finding courses, so were permitted to attend classes at NJC, an early instance of coeducation. The impact of war on the academic program at NJC and other women’s colleges was, of course, much less pronounced. Overall, the demands of war temporarily promoted greater opportunities for women to study in traditionally male fields. The wartime emphasis on mathematics and science led to a 29 percent increase in bachelor’s degrees awarded to women in these subjects during the war. At NJC, the trend toward math and science that had begun in the late 1930s continued. In 1944–1945, NJC had the highest enrollment in advanced physics, chemistry, and mathematics in its history. At the same time, there were fewer women preparing to be teachers and librarians. During the war, for the first time, NJC students were permitted to take classes in certain departments at the College of Engineering. Students who were not majoring in science were encouraged to take science courses as electives.

Only a few changes were made in the formal NJC curriculum as a direct result of the war. Unlike the men’s colleges, NJC did not adopt a twelve-month academic year. A poll of students indicated that they relied on their summer jobs too much for income. A few students did arrange an accelerated program, and a special graduation exercise was held at the end of the fall semester, 1942. A few new courses were introduced, including a public administration course to meet civil service requirements and a short course in calculus for nonmathematics majors. The war stimulated student interest in international relations and cultures, contributing to the development of new history courses.
like Organization of the Post-War World and courses in Portuguese and Latin American studies. The latter built on an exchange program with Latin America, funded by the New Jersey State Federation of Women’s Clubs, that had been introduced after 1939 when study abroad in Europe was no longer possible. Nancy Petersen Godfrey (NJC ’44) recalled that “through history courses on the changing world and post-war problems, we [acquired] an awareness of such problems.” Other courses were adapted to wartime needs, such as Emily Hickman’s Pacific World course, which incorporated material on Japanese history and civilization, and a new German course for translators, censors, and shortwave radio operators.

Because of the wartime emphasis on physically toughening the younger generation, the physical education requirement was extended yet again to four years. New activities like gymnastics and cross-country running were added, while the more lady-like badminton and tap dancing were dropped. “Free election of activities has been limited in such a way as to ensure enrollment in vigorous class work for at least two of the three seasons of the year.” The new requirements were not universally popular. Jean Comeforo (NJC ’45) recalled, “A lot of us got injured on that obstacle course, but we were supposed to jump over fences, and swing on the bars and all that kind of stuff to keep us healthy and strong, the homefront should be strong.” A home economics major, she recalled that “all our recipes were for vitamins.”

The war was also hard on the NJC faculty, although they experienced far less disruption and uncertainty than did their colleagues at the men’s colleges. Like the Rutgers College faculty, they were required to teach without compensation at the new extended summer session. Twenty-seven NJC professors and instructors, both men and women, left for various types of war service. For example, economist Miriam West worked on defense housing under the Federal Works Agency before moving on to the War Labor Board. Those remaining were required to fill in where needed: Emil Jordan of the German department taught Portuguese, Jessie Fiske of the botany department took over some zoology courses, and Shirley Smith of classics taught elementary mathematics. In subjects where enrollment had dropped, like library science, education, and Italian, Corwin was forced to ask instructors to work part time, although some were able to pick up teaching for the ASTP or ASTRP.

**New Career Opportunities**

Like women throughout the country, NJC students took advantage of the new career opportunities provided by the war. Many graduates of these years found war industry-related jobs, while others took the places of men called up for service. In March 1942, the nearby Raritan Arsenal contacted NJC with an urgent request for fifty women with scientific or mathematical backgrounds to replace male section leaders who had been drafted.

In 1943, Placement Bureau director Fredericka Belknap reported that 24 percent of the Class of 1942 was employed in war industries, the armed forces, or government. “Since last September, I have been besieged by prospective employers asking
for permission to interview in particular our majors in mathematics, physics and chemistry, and the seniors who have taken drafting." Home economics majors were also in demand for positions as dieticians in the military and in government, as experts tried to determine the dietary needs of troops and of civilians in case of rationing. Six NJC home economics majors from the Class of 1942 found jobs as food inspectors at the U.S. Department of Agriculture, an area where few women had found employment in the past. Liberal arts majors also easily found jobs during the war. Frieda Finklestein Feller, a Spanish and French major, worked in the Office of Censorship following graduation in 1941, ultimately specializing in "Secret Inks." Nancy Squire Christensen (NJC ’44), an English major, recalled that IBM came to the college to recruit, looking for people with a broad background. She was trained as a punch card operator and ultimately worked as a systems service representative. At the same time, fewer NJC graduates took jobs in the more traditional roles of teachers or librarians, areas where there was still a great need during the war years.

The need to replace men who were drafted led to new opportunities for women. Places in graduate schools opened up for women, particularly in the sciences. Phyllis Pollock Magat (NJC ’44) was accepted into the doctoral program in chemistry at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She recalled, "Our entering class in the chemistry grad school in 1944 was small (about eight) and were mostly women. The professors were amazed but soon got over any prejudice." Adelaide Marcus Zagoren (NJC ’40), a journalism major, could not find a full-time job upon her graduation in 1940 and recalled that the only jobs available to women were writing for the society pages. The following year, however, she easily found a job for the Home News. "I could find a job in a newspaper in ’41 because all the men had left."

Historian Margaret Rossiter notes that many of the new opportunities for women in science did not extend beyond the entry level and had an uncertain future once the war was over. Some NJC women joined the new women’s armed services. According to Richard P. McCormick, 173 NJC alumnae and students entered military service during the World War II era. Most NJC women joined the WAVES, although some joined the WAC, the Red Cross, or the Cadet Nurse Corps. The WAVES recruited heavily at NJC, and the 1943 commencement speaker was Mildred McAfee, the president of Wellesley College, who served as director of the WAVES from 1942 to 1946. Jean O’Grady Sheehan (NJC ’43) overcame opposition from her father and her pastor to join in December 1942. O’Grady, from a strict Roman Catholic family, grew up a few blocks from NJC and had hardly been away from home. She recalled that her motives for joining the military were mixed: “You did feel very patriotic, but there were other issues besides the patriotism. There was a selfish issue there, the traveling, the being away from home, getting away from home, wearing the nice uniform. At age twenty, that was a big appeal. Yes, it was exciting for a young woman.” O’Grady became a recruiter for the WAVES based in Atlanta. She met her future husband, a military pilot, while in the service and they spent ten years living in Venezuela.
Like many of the college-educated women in the military, Jean O’Grady became an officer. Nancy Petersen Godfrey (NJC ’44) also joined the WAVES after graduation, but remained in the ranks. She was offered the opportunity to apply for a commission, but her mother discouraged her because Nancy’s fiancé, who was also in the navy, was an enlisted man. “My mother said, ‘Well, you wouldn’t want to do that, ’cause it would make Bill feel, whatever, lesser or something.’” After her education at NJC, which she described as “one place where you could sort of be yourself and you didn’t have to compete with boys,” this was “the first time I felt that it was different to be a woman.” Most NJC women found their experience in the military to be empowering. Margaret Harriet Waugh (NJC ’44) recalled, “It gives you a lot of self-confidence, for some reason or other. . . . It was reassuring, in some way, to say, ‘Oh, I was in the Navy for a year.’” A science major, Waugh later worked in bacteriology at E. R. Squibb and Sons in New Brunswick.

Although military service offered new opportunities for women, some lost their lives during the conflict. At least four NJC alumnae died while serving. Anna Jane
Evans (NJC ’35), president of her class, entered the Army Nurse Corps in 1944. She was posted to a regional hospital at Camp Lee, Virginia, where she was killed in an automobile accident in October 1945. Marian Carol Gillis (NJC ’37) joined the WAC in 1943. Stationed in Guam, she died in a plane crash over Shangri-La in May 1945. Ruth Ballard Murdock (NJC ’41), a music major from Montclair, and Cecil Florence Ritchie Nichols (NJC ’39) both worked as staff assistants for the Red Cross. Murdock, who was attached to the Eighth Army Group in Munich organizing clubs for soldiers, was killed in an accident returning from leave on the Riviera, while Nichols died in a plane crash in Australia.55

**Student Life during Wartime**

Unlike the situation at the men’s colleges, where virtually all extracurricular activities were suspended during the war, student life at NJC continued as it had before the conflict. As at other women’s colleges, organizations were established to aid the war effort and existing clubs and societies redirected their activities to war-related work. Now enlarged and aptly renamed the War Services Committee but still chaired by Margaret Judson, the Defense and Relief Committee served as a clearinghouse for war-related campus activities, including recruiting volunteers for community projects and raising money for relief—a total of sixteen thousand dollars was raised by the end of the war.56 Selling war bonds was popular; because students had little money, they tended to buy stamps until they collected enough to purchase the cheapest bond for $18.75.57 In 1942, the *Caellian* editors undertook a two-year campaign to sell corsages made of war stamps, managing to raise five hundred dollars by 1944, despite an initial lack of enthusiasm.58 Many students did war work off campus, including working in day care centers for the children of factory workers, serving as hostesses at the United Service Organizations (USO) club on Albany Street, and folding surgical dressings at Johnson & Johnson for a minimal sum, replacing regular employees who had been called up.59

In deference to the wartime mood, the gala celebration planned for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the college was replaced by a simple convocation in the chapel on October 9, 1943. At the ceremony, Margaret Corwin was awarded an honorary doctorate from Rutgers in commemoration of the anniversary and her ten years as dean. NJC’s twenty-fifth anniversary was further marked by the publication of *Twenty-Five Years: Two Anniversary Sketches of New Jersey College for Women* by Rosamond Sawyer Moxon (NJC ’29) and Mabel Clarke Peabody (NJC ’31). Corwin sent copies of the book to fellow women’s colleges.60

The Education Subcommittee, under Emily Hickman, offered an expanding number of noncredit war-related courses, including engineering drawing, secretarial work, first aid, nutrition, stagecraft, radio communication, and auto mechanics. In 1941–1942, 444 students enrolled in these courses. Hickman also organized a series of fortnightly talks by members of the faculty and distinguished visiting lecturers. These included anthropologist Margaret Mead; engineer and scientific management pioneer
Lillian Moller Gilbreth; and Eleanor Roosevelt, who first visited NJC in December 1940 under the auspices of the International Student Services. On January 17, 1944, she again addressed the students on the topic “why young women should remain in college in wartime.” Prior to her lecture, she enjoyed a dinner at Woodlawn, the mansion that trustee and benefactor James Neilson had bequeathed to NJC, hosted by the Student Lecture Committee.61

In tune with the more serious atmosphere on campus, more frivolous or costly activities such as the freshman breakfast, parents’ day, and junior show were dropped, some never to be revived. Club activities were more limited, and some clubs merged, like a new organization created from the history, economics, political science, and sociology clubs, called HEPS. The conviction that the war was being fought to safeguard democracy led some students to think more critically about the state of democracy at home. Race relations were in the news during the war as pressure mounted to desegregate the military and pass civil rights legislation to acknowledge the contribution of African Americans to the war effort.62 In December 1943, HEPS established the Racial and Minorities Relations Committee, stating boldly, “Our primary purpose is to better relations between racial and minority groups on campus, our secondary aim is to carry this program further into the community and the nation.”63 To this end the committee
created exhibits at Botany and Recitation halls on segregation and discrimination in education, labor, and housing; wrote articles for the *Caellian* dealing with racial prejudice; invited speakers; and collected and distributed pamphlets like anthropologist Ruth Benedict’s *The Races of Mankind*, which attempted to set out the scientific case against racist beliefs.64

Most notably, the committee campaigned to permit African American students to live on campus at NJC. Since Julia Baxter Bates’s time, a few black women had attended NJC but, like Baxter, were commuters.65 As Chair Eleanor Oliven (NJC ’48) cautiously noted, the committee members had been discussing the question for several years and they did not want to force the issue, but they believed active steps should be taken: “We need to have a few Negro girls living on campus, so those considering coming to NJC will not hesitate to live on campus. Actual contacts in houses will do a good deal towards breaking down prejudice.”66 Many of Oliven’s fellow students supported the campaign. Nancy Petersen Godfrey recalled pointing out at an assembly that the administration did not allow black students to live on campus: “Anyway, I got called to the dean’s [Boddie’s] office and [was] asked to, I guess, repent, or something. What did she say? Maybe she said [that] I shouldn’t feel that way, I should understand that they had to sort of bow to the will of the parents.”67 Irene Prager (NJC ’44), in a letter to the *Caellian*, inquired why NJC did not admit more black women.68 The first African American women to live on campus were Emma A. Warren, the younger sister of Constance Andrews (NJC ’45), and Evelyn S. Field, both from the Class of 1949. They commuted their first year, but because of continuing support from HEPS, which found a scholarship to cover their room and board, they moved to campus the following year. At first they roomed together but later lived in separate dormitories. Field recalled that living on campus was “a very enriching experience.” She found most people supportive, although one student reputedly moved out of a cottage when she heard that Field was coming. The Urban League of New Brunswick sponsored Friday night socials where NJC’s African American women were able to meet black men from Rutgers College.69

**Social Life on a Wartime Campus**

During the war, heterosexual social life at NJC was much more limited. With the male students away, there were far fewer dances or other coeducational activities. Mary Lou Norton Busch remembered “no boys around to date during the war.”70 Nancy Squire Christenson (NJC ’44) recalled that “there weren’t many blind dates during the war.” She and her friends “played bridge and went to the movies a lot.”71 Despite the fact that there were fewer men on campus, the marriage rate actually rose.72 NJC students sometimes hurried to wed before their boyfriends were sent overseas. Mary Lou Norton Busch, who left NJC during the war to marry her high school boyfriend, “would never have thought of getting married if war had not occurred.” She returned to finish her degree many years later.73 This period marked the beginning of a long-term drop in age at marriage and increase in the birthrate, the “baby boom.”74 In her study of alumnae in
the twenty-fifth-anniversary volume, Mabel Peabody discovered that early marriage was reported much more frequently by the youngest classes than by any preceding class: in 1943, 18 percent of the students in the classes 1940–1942 had married before their twenty-second birthdays. This pattern was similar to that at women’s colleges in general during this period.

Married NJC students, like those at other women’s colleges, were not allowed to live on campus. Jean Comeforo (NJC ’45) remembered that Dean Boddie called classmates who got married into her office for a talk. Her friend reported that “they had to live off campus, but . . . Dean wanted to be sure that they didn’t talk about what you did in marriage to all these young innocent little girls who were on campus.” Nancy Petersen Godfrey’s sister got married in her senior year and “had to live in a separate house with the black students.” Another friend got married secretly. Because so many women students were marrying servicemen, this prohibition was abandoned at most women’s colleges, including NJC, by 1943.

In the absence of male college students, some NJC women dated ASTP men or soldiers from Camp Kilmer, the embarkation camp that opened in nearby Piscataway in 1942. With thousands of servicemen passing through the camp, the atmosphere in New Brunswick changed dramatically. Although NJC was officially off limits to soldiers from Camp Kilmer, Corwin was concerned about security in downtown New Brunswick, requiring women students to travel in groups of four. Corwin hoped to persuade the Camp Kilmer commander to require soldiers on leave to return to camp by midnight rather than 6:00 a.m. It is doubtful if she was successful, although a guard was posted at the campus. Most of the soldiers at Camp Kilmer were enlisted men rather than officers, which probably contributed to Corwin’s anxiety, but there seem to have
been relatively few incidents, considering the number of soldiers passing through the base. Jean Comeforo (NJC ’45), who commuted to NJC by train from Metuchen, recalled being followed home by a soldier. She later discovered that another woman had been attacked nearby that night.  

With fiancés, friends, and brothers serving overseas, NJC women developed strong bonds with each other. As Richard P. McCormick wrote, the war’s “impact was intensely emotional, for it touches everyone with the agony of death and the fervor of sacrifice.” Miriam Null (NJC ’46), who lived on campus, stated, “I think our big . . . invasion was 1944 and friends of mine, my classmates at college, they all had boyfriends over there. They . . . were biting their fingernails at the quick waiting for the telegrams to come. One of them . . . was a bomber . . . in the 8th Air Force and they would go off to Germany every night. She was having fits. We were all having fits with her. . . . We were all her support group.” Some NJC women did experience losses, particularly those going out with ASTP men, many of whom were killed in the Battle of the Bulge. In all, 234 Rutgers men gave their lives during World War II.

Postwar NJC: Era of Continuity and Change

The end of the war in August 1945 brought important changes at Rutgers. Before the end of the conflict, President Clothier approached state officials about crafting a new relationship between the state and the university, replacing the ineffectual Board of Regents. In 1945, the legislature passed a bill designating the whole of Rutgers—rather
than just NJC, the College of Agriculture, and certain other departments—the State University of New Jersey. Rutgers University was now an “instrumentality of the state,” without losing any of its autonomy. The bill, which was supported by the Associate Alumnae, the New Jersey State Federation of Women’s Clubs, and other women’s organizations, had important consequences for NJC. In some respects, the college became more closely integrated into the university. As part of the reorganization, Rutgers created a Special Committee on Personnel Procedures, chaired by former NJC acting dean Albert E. Meder. Under Meder’s leadership, appointments, promotions, and tenure were regularized at NJC and brought in line with procedures at the men’s colleges, and a more equitable salary scale was adopted. For the first time, a retirement plan was introduced. Another consequence was that a state university could no longer demand compulsory attendance at chapel. NJC continued to hold two assemblies a week, but now only attendance at the secular assembly was required. During the war, the students had approached Corwin about creating an interfaith committee, which sponsored diverse religious services at the college and organized regular trips to various churches and synagogues.

With the end of the war and the passage of the Servicemen’s Readjustment Act, better known as the G.I. Bill, in 1944, male students flocked to Rutgers. Fraternities, clubs, and social life resumed with a vengeance. Several new coeducational activities were introduced, including the WRSU radio station, the University Choir, and the Queen’s Players theater group. Women cheerleaders began to appear at football games. Enrollment skyrocketed at the men’s colleges as veterans took advantage of the new educational opportunity, increasing from 750 in September 1945 to 3,200 in September 1946 and to a peak of 4,200 a year later. Enrollment increased rapidly at NJC as well. By 1947, the women’s college had 1,210 students, two hundred more than the college’s physical plan could reasonably accommodate. In her annual report, Corwin noted that the college was accepting only a third of applicants, turning away many qualified young women.

Although NJC was not as overcrowded as Rutgers College, the leaders of both institutions were keenly aware of the need for more classroom, office, and dormitory space. As early as 1943, the college purchased 23 Nichol Avenue from the estate of Frances Hall. Corwin moved there from the former dean’s residence at 135 George Street, which was turned into office space. In 1947, Rutgers began to lobby for a state bond issue to finance construction projects, including a new library, gymnasium, and student center at NJC, for which architectural plans had been drawn up several years before. The fifty-million-dollar proposal was also designed to aid the state colleges and welfare agencies. The measure faced opposition, as had the 1945 bill, from taxpayers’ associations and religious groups that challenged Rutgers’s legitimacy as a public university. In the end, the bond issue lost by more than eighty thousand votes in the November 1948 election. The defeat was a severe blow for Margaret Corwin and NJC. Fund-raising efforts were refocused on the Associate Alumnae’s campaign for a
new student center, which proved difficult in the era of rising costs and economic retrenchment that followed the war. The campaign had not yet met its goal when it was folded into the university capital campaign launched in 1950. The end result was the completion of the student center in 1953, the first building to rise on the NJC campus since Jameson in 1931.93

The postwar period was characterized by a return to traditional gender roles. After the war, women experienced pressure to return to “normal,” to marry, and to start families. The marriage rate peaked in 1946, while the age of marriage was decreasing and fertility rates rose.94 College-educated women, including those at single-sex institutions, also felt pressure to marry early. According to distinguished historian of women’s higher education Barbara Solomon, “A diamond ring on the fourth finger was the sign of success most valued in one’s senior year at Vassar in 1949.”95 Mary Lou Norton Busch (DC ’82), who ultimately returned to Douglass and graduated in 1982, recalled, “After the war, everybody was expected to go home and have kids and keep house.”96 To some extent, NJC administrators encouraged this trend. The home economics department offered a class in foods, which was open to only juniors and seniors majoring in liberal arts. The course description specified what students were taught: “Selection, prepara-
tion and serving of foods. Planning of balanced menus. Table Service for special occasions. Evaluation of publications available to the housewife."97 Students nicknamed the class the “Bride’s Course,” describing the curriculum as “Cooking!”98 In 1949, the Faculty-Student Service Council sponsored a series of lectures on marriage. Duke sociologist Hornell Hart advised students that “the most important aim in life between the ages of 14 and 24 is to find the right life partner and then to marry that partner.”99

After the war, there was an overall drop in the number of employers looking for scientifically trained women.100 By 1948, the number of women engaged in scientific work had decreased 2.5 percent from wartime levels. Ominously, reports surfaced that one employer was reluctant to spend time training women because they got married so soon, especially when more men were available. As of May 1949, almost one-quarter of the class of 1948 were already married.101 The following year, there was growing unemployment among recent graduates. “No matter how excellent a woman’s work may have been, when a choice is necessary, industry seems to prefer a man.”102 Many of those who had found work during the war were leaving to marry. Nancy Squire Christiansen left IBM in 1946, noting that her husband did not want her to work. “That was an era when your wife didn’t work. If she did, it looked like you couldn’t support her, almost that.”103 In her study of over three hundred alumnae of the war era, Laura Micheletti concluded that war service had long-term effects on women’s confidence, showing them that they

▲ DANCE CLASS, QUAIR, 1956. PHOTO BY BRADBURY, SAYLES, AND O’NEILL
could fulfill roles traditionally reserved for men. Many of these women returned to work much later, after their children had grown up.

Several alumnae credit their NJC experience with contributing to this confidence. Frieda Finklestein Feller (NJC ‘41) commented, “They brought in women like Margaret Mead to show us that you could do something.” After her stint in censorship during the war, Feller worked in her family’s real estate business before returning to Rutgers to do a master’s degree in education. She ultimately taught at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education. Evelyn Field (NJC ‘49) believed that NJC gave her “the opportunity to realize that as a woman, and even as a minority woman, as they say[,] you can do anything that you want to do.” Field went on to earn master’s degrees in education and library service from Rutgers University. As well as an accomplished librarian and educator, she became a founding trustee of Raritan Valley Community College and a member of the Rutgers Board of Trustees and received numerous accolades for her contribution to women’s advancement and civil rights.

The early 1950s marked the end of an era for NJC. Many long-serving administrators retired, among them larger-than-life personality Leah Boddie and her assistant Elizabeth P. Thomas. Alice Aronoff, first appointed by Mabel Smith Douglass in 1918, librarian Ada English, and placement officer Fredericka Belknap also retired in 1954. Also retiring were many longtime faculty members, including Anna Campbell of the history department, C. Everard Deems of religion, and Helen Richardson of psychology, while Alice Schlimbach resigned her position as head of the German House and Jane Inge of drama stepped down from her role as department chair. Margaret Corwin’s friend and ally President Robert C. Clothier retired in July 1951 and was replaced by Lewis Webster Jones. Corwin herself remained until July 1, 1955. In her last years as dean, Margaret Corwin continued to advocate for lighter teaching loads and greater research opportunities for faculty and for an expanded physical plant “to prepare for the rising tide of students that we know to be rapidly approaching.” She constantly reaffirmed NJC’s identity as a liberal arts college grounded in the example of elite private women’s colleges like her own alma mater, Bryn Mawr.

After her retirement Margaret Corwin returned to Connecticut, where she lived for many years in Guilford, keeping in close touch with the college. She died in 1983 at the age of ninety-three. By holding NJC together through the difficult years of the Great Depression and World War II, she ensured her legacy. By the 1950s, however, Corwin was increasingly out of step with the demands of a growing public university and a new generation of young women. An educated and highly accomplished leader herself, she was nevertheless bound by the limits of class, race, and gender of her upbringing. In her later years, she was loved by her former students, who credited her with instilling in them her dedication to service. As Adelaide Zagoren (NJC ’40) recalled, “She always encouraged you to go beyond yourself and do what you could.”