

Bryn Mawr College Board of Trustees, Summer 2018

To the Bryn Mawr Community:

I write on behalf of the Bryn Mawr College Board of Trustees to share our decision about how the College will recognize its founding dean and second president, M. Carey Thomas, and how this decision reflects our commitment to the mission of the College and the goals of equity and inclusion. This is the result of a substantial process of study, consultation, and debate. As a learning community, we bear a responsibility to question our many histories, to learn from them, and to shape the institution through this engagement. This offers us an opportunity to learn and grow in our collective understanding of Bryn Mawr's mission and core values.

On behalf of the Board, I thank all of those who contributed to that process. I thank President Cassidy for initiating and shaping an approach that epitomizes the College's values of thorough research, wide consultation, and thoughtful debate; the History Working Group for their careful study, listening, and recommendations; and all of the students, faculty members, staff, and alumnae/i who contributed their voices and perspectives. We often speak of Bryn Mawr as a diverse community founded on respect for the individual, and it is impressive and moving to see it in action, as people of disparate backgrounds and views gather to share thoughts, listen, and forge a shared path forward.

A summary of the History Working Group's efforts, including a schedule of listening sessions, bibliography, recommendations, and more, is online at brynmawr.edu/history-working-group. We commend the openness of the Group's work, which included multiple invitations and ways to participate in the discussion. After receiving the Group's recommendations, the Board of Trustees engaged in its own historical research, debate, and consultation. We framed this discussion with an affirmation of the mission of academic excellence and access that guides Bryn Mawr College and informs the principles on which our decisions rest.

Bryn Mawr's Mission

Bryn Mawr was founded "for the advanced education of females": to offer women an education of the rigor that was then denied to them in the United States. Since the founding of the College, our commitment to academic excellence has been unwavering. Today, the College is committed to the education of all women of intellectual promise and ambition. As our current mission

states: “we believe that only through considering many perspectives do we gain a deeper understanding of each other and the world.” These values frame all that we do; we cannot pursue our mission without committing to the work of equity.

Principles for Naming

Names on campus are powerful symbols of who we are and whom we aspire to be. In recognition of this, the Board has affirmed the following principles concerning “recognition naming.”

1. The Board of Trustees is responsible for honorific and memorial naming of positions, programs, buildings, spaces, and awards. Honorific and memorial naming recognizes exceptional levels of achievement, service and/or support.
2. Naming should be consistent with the mission of the College and the values expressed by that mission. Those honored should embody values that members of the College community would seek to emulate.
3. Renaming in consideration of values or actions associated with the namesake will be undertaken rarely and reluctantly. There is a presumption against renaming programs, buildings, spaces, and awards on the basis of the values associated with their namesakes. Some views that we hold today, including those expounded in the most enlightened universities, may be shown to be misguided in the future. Consideration of renaming thus requires thoughtful discernment and should be accompanied by humility.

In considering whether renaming is an appropriate course of action, the Board will consider whether the principal legacy of the namesake is fundamentally at odds with the mission of the College and the values expressed by that mission. In cases of those currently honored or memorialized who held views or engaged in practices inconsistent with the College’s current mission and values, effort should be made to provide a fuller context of the individual’s work and values. It is also important to assess how heavily the legacy weighs on the College community, including the faculty, students, and staff who represent the present and future of the College. When considering renaming, the College endeavors to ensure that any renaming decision does not have the effect of erasing history.

4. Establishing naming going forward should take into account the College's mission and values, including its desire to be diverse and inclusive as well as its desire to honor support, service, and achievement.

Legacy of M. Carey Thomas

Among Bryn Mawr's former presidents and deans, M. Carey Thomas is prominently memorialized on campus. The iconic campus building that housed the original library, and its hall, were named in 1935 to recognize Thomas' contributions to Bryn Mawr College. In addition, the College recognizes Thomas' legacy through the M. Carey Thomas Award, which is given to "an American woman in recognition of eminent achievement," and two writing prizes.

Guided by Bryn Mawr College's principles for naming, the Board reviewed and discussed historical documents and input from community members, paying particular attention to:

1. Whether Thomas' achievement or service to the College was exceptional.
2. Whether she embodied values that members of the College should seek to emulate.
3. What the symbolic weight of Thomas' legacy and associated values communicate to faculty, students and staff.

The Board recognizes that Thomas' achievements and service to the College were indeed exceptional. She persisted through the institutionalized sexism of three different graduate schools across two continents to earn her Ph.D., and she produced scholarship that remained highly regarded for nearly a century. She was a national spokeswoman for higher education for women, a leader in the women's suffrage movement, and an early advocate for an Equal Rights Amendment to the Constitution. She set the highest standards for Bryn Mawr in every respect, including rigorous entrance exams, an Oxford- and Cambridge-inspired campus plan, and a commitment to building a faculty of talented scholar-teachers. Her insistence upon women's capacity for intellectual achievement changed the face of the academy and continues to animate Bryn Mawr.

The Board also considered whether Thomas embodied values that members of the College should seek to emulate. Following review of documents and discussion, the Board determined that Thomas embodied both values that members of the College should emulate and also values that the College cannot countenance.

Entwined with Thomas' fierce ambition for women's intellectual achievement was a commitment to the idea that white racial superiority was essential to a successful society. This was openly espoused and well documented. In her opening address for the 1916 academic year at Bryn Mawr, for example, she argued to the assembled students and faculty: "If the present intellectual supremacy of the white races is maintained, as I hope that it will be for centuries to come, I believe that it will be because they are the only races that have seriously begun to educate their women." In this same Convocation speech, she maintained that the immigration of "backward people of Europe" [Slavs, Czechs, and southern Italians] and mixing of the races "endanger(ed) our great position among the nations of the world."

Thomas both spoke openly of these beliefs and acted on them on behalf of the College. She blocked the hiring of Jewish faculty and the admission of qualified Jewish students. She refused to consider the admission of African American students, even rescinding admission offers made to qualified African American students. She denied a Bryn Mawr education and employment to exceptional persons because of their backgrounds. Though these policies were not unique among elite institutions of the time, the Board noted that Thomas' perspective and actions are antithetical to the College's value of inclusion.

The Board finally considered the impact of Thomas' legacy on the current community, based on the many listening sessions, discussions, and correspondence shared during the course of the History Working Group's efforts, as well as other documents and discussions shared directly with the Board. We noted that many in the Bryn Mawr community find Thomas' storied intellectual achievements, her fierce belief in women's abilities, and her feminism to be empowering. Indeed, Thomas' accomplishments are so vast that she has become a pre-eminent symbol of and for the Bryn Mawr community – her story (or a part of it) has become our story, and it continues to shape how we imagine and talk about ourselves today.

Many spoke of Thomas' racist and anti-Semitic beliefs and actions, however, as a troubling, painful, and ultimately disempowering legacy. The College's original library, planned by and later named for Thomas, remains a hub of academic activity and important events, a physical projection of the College's identity. Living and working on campus requires the regular intonation of Thomas' name – evoking academic ambition but also exclusion and devaluation. Some said that the centrality of Thomas' name indicates the College's lack of understanding and acknowledgement of President Thomas' racist and anti-Semitic beliefs and leads them to question the College's commitment to inclusion.

The Board's Decision

The Board has decided to leave Thomas' name inscribed on the building façade but to use the names "The Old Library" and "The Great Hall" – the original names of the building and hall, modified slightly – in the daily life of the College. In keeping with this decision, all awards bearing Thomas' name will be called "The Bryn Mawr College" prize or award, while the published description of those prizes and awards will include the history of the name, to reflect the layering of our history.

In leaving M. Carey Thomas' name on the building and not renaming it in another person's honor, we will continue to value President Thomas' many remarkable contributions to the College. The inscription also reminds us to confront all aspects of Thomas' legacy and to tell our full history. We recognize that for many the building will always be "Thomas" – indeed, that is a part of our history and part of the lives of many of our alumnae/i. We ask the College also to find ways to communicate a fuller history of M. Carey Thomas' life and support ongoing reflection. We need to preserve and engage with this history and build it into the education we provide. We hope, moreover, that this decision will offer opportunities to understand and share many other histories.

Bryn Mawr's work—the work of ensuring that women of intellectual promise can pursue their academic passion and personal ambitions—has been the College's purpose and mission since its founding. An essential part of this mission is a commitment to inclusion and equity, including working and standing against racial, religious, and other forms of exclusion.

The Board and the College commit to the real work that lies ahead. The Board fully supports the work of the current administration and many previous administrations in redressing racism, anti-Semitism, and other forms of discrimination. The work accomplished through the College's Diversity and Inclusion Plan (online at brynmawr.edu/diversity-and-inclusion), a living document shaped through the efforts of the campus community, will continue and will take advantage of the thoughtful recommendations of the History Working Group. The Board acknowledges that it is crucial for the community itself to guide this ongoing work.

The Board will continue and increase its focus on the work of equity. We will form a working group to ensure our ongoing commitment to inclusion and equity, look at our own practices, continue and increase our efforts to recruit people of color to the Board, and identify ways that the Board can further its own efforts and support campus efforts.

The research, debate, and reflection in which the campus and the Board engaged this year has been inspiring, and it has spurred us to listen to and understand one another more deeply. The Board is grateful for this opportunity to learn and work in partnership with our full community – students, faculty, staff, alumnae/i, parents, and friends – to envision and create our future, illuminated by a deeper understanding of our past.

Sincerely,

Ann Logan

Chair, Bryn Mawr College Board of Trustees