

Romario Ortiz

Professor Yvonne Elet

CLCS/Art 120 The Vassar Campus

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The Forgotten Graduates: Vassar's First Male Graduates

Like many incoming first year students, when I received the news that I was accepted into a college in upstate New York by the name of Vassar, most of my friends and even my immediate family had never heard of the college. Others were under the assumption that the college was still an all-female campus. Nevertheless, I began my journey much like those before me in the fall of 2017. Little did I know at the time, that my status as a Posse veteran scholar on campus was not all that new; not new in the sense of there were other scholar classes before me in the Posse program, not new in the sense that we were, all of us, not the first military veterans to study and graduate at Vassar.

The subject of the first men at Vassar is not one often heard in conversations today. The college became co-educational in 1969, but the first males at Vassar predate this by more than two decades. Who were these men? Which theater of operations did they serve? How many were there and where did they go and study? What sorts of questions arose and what controversies may have abounded from having men study at a women's college? Was the faculty, and even the trustees of the college, on board with having them on campus? Questions such as these, and countless others emerged in my search for answers.

The story of the first men at Vassar begins in the aftermath of World War II. The returning men were soon to be recipients of an educational benefit enacted from congressional legislation known as the *Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944*, the G.I. Bill.¹ This was a law that provided a range of educational, employment, and housing benefits for returning World War II veterans. The goal of this legislation was to reduce the possibility of a postwar depression brought on by massive unemployment. It was estimated by the Department of Labor that after the war, 15 million men and women who had been serving in the armed forces would be unemployed.² This act would also help avoid the highly disputed and postponed "cash bonus" payout for World War I veterans that caused political turmoil for a decade and a half postwar.

Among these recipients were a group of individuals native to the mid-Hudson valley area of Poughkeepsie, New York. The capacity of local colleges and universities that accepted men were overwhelmed and soon became overcrowded. So, by order of Governor Thomas Dewey of New York in an "emergency education program", educational institutions were asked to help with the overcrowding, to include Vassar college. Thirty-six of them entered Vassar in April of 1946.³ That fall, their numbers almost tripled. Altogether, according to information from the registrar's office, 170 male veterans took classes at Vassar in the post-war years. Most left Vassar

¹ "Servicemen's Readjustment Act (1944)." *Our Documents - Servicemen's Readjustment Act (1944)*, www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=76#.

² "Servicemen's Readjustment Act (1944)." *Our Documents - Servicemen's Readjustment Act (1944)*, www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=76#.

³ Margaret Myers, Report, Fall 1947, Subject Files, Folder 26.36. Vassar College Archives

before graduating, either transferring to another institution or for employment. Those who stayed to earn bachelor's degrees were awarded their degrees by the State University of New York, not Vassar, whose charter prevented the college from awarding degrees to men.⁴ Since most of the veterans entered with the class of 1950, they have, over the years, been affiliated with that class. Half of these veterans who graduated via Vassar did so in 1950.⁵

Of the thirty-six men enrolled at Vassar in the Fall of 1946, six of them were from Poughkeepsie; they were Carmine J. Calenti, Themistocles G. Aposporos, Joseph J. Damico, Peter Theodoropoulos, O. Howard Winn, and Kenneth W. Kaeli. All entered Vassar in September of 1946, with the exception of Mr. Calenti who entered in 1948 after having spent his first two college years at Triple Cities College of Syracuse University.⁶ These men were seen as optimal candidates for study at the college since they were local and could pose no problem to being housed since they lived nearby. However, this didn't deter the college from admitting male students from areas as far away as Rockville, Maryland. Moreover, since the G.I. Bill was passed in 1944, this gave many institutions the time needed to prepare and accommodate the influx of returning veterans.

⁴ Faculty Minutes, 1946 Mar 25, Subject Files, Folder 26.36. Vassar College Archives

⁵ Cynthia Mascioli, 1973 Feb 7, Inter-Departmental Memo, Subject Files, Folder 26.36. Vassar College Archives

⁶ Office of Public Relations Memo, May 3 1950, Subject Files, Folder 26.37. Vassar College Archives

According to the Board of Trustees minutes, the question of allowing men on campus was being discussed as early as May of 1945.⁷ In that particular meeting, it was decided that because, “the charter of Vassar college empower it to grant degrees only to women” the outgoing President of the college at the time, Dr. MacCracken, announced the willingness of the University of the State of New York and various universities to give credit for any course certified by Vassar. In the case that should any of these men wish to transfer to any of these institutions they would receive their degrees from them and not Vassar. This was further resolved when the faculty of Vassar met the following year in March 25, 1946 and solidified the college’s commitment to the veterans by “admitting properly qualified men for study.”⁸

Peter Berg (Class of 1950), who wrote extensively in the March 1947 *Vassar Alumnae Magazine*⁹, Vassar's fall 1946 entering class of veterans comprised men whose "former ranks in the service ranged from private to major, with all branches represented." The average age of the men was 21, and their average length of service was three-and-a-half to four years, Berg reported. Thirteen of them were married. Before the war, 22 had attended colleges such as Cornell, Princeton, Yale, the University of Rome, the University of Vienna, and the GI University at Biarritz. They studied, "in order of popularity: english, mathematics, physics,

⁷ Board of Trustees Minutes, May 1945, Vassar College Archives

⁸ Margaret Myers, Faculty Minutes, Volume 11, P.396, Subject Files, Folder 26.36, Vassar College Archives

⁹ Peter Berg (1950), Vassar Alumnae Magazine, Mar 1947, Subject Files, Folder 26.38 News Clippings, Vassar College Archives

chemistry, economics, psychology," Berg wrote. Many of them planned to continue on to pre-med or pre-engineering programs as soon as room could be found for them.

How did these men end up at one of the most prestigious colleges for women? Essentially it was a case of circumstance, necessity, and luck. "Under the G.I. bill, approximately 2,300,000 returning veterans attended colleges and universities, 3,500,000 received school training, and 3,400,000 received on-the-job training. The number of degrees awarded by U.S. colleges and universities more than doubled between 1940 and 1950, and the percentage of Americans with bachelor degrees, or advanced degrees, rose from 4.6 percent in 1945 to 25 percent a half-century later."¹⁰ Vassar saw this as an opportunity to not only help with the situation but also because as stated by Margaret Myers, Chairman of the Vassar Veterans Committee, "colleges exist to serve the needs of students."¹¹ These students were interviewed by a committee, they were assessed, and it was their policy to accept candidates who had the equivalent of college preparatory work regardless of grades. This policy seemed to be justified by the results. The faculty and members of the veterans committee remarked on how none of the applicants who were accepted seemed to be a "playboy." There was no lowering of the standards for the veterans. Their grades ranged from anywhere from the straight A record of a Pre-Med student, to

¹⁰ "Servicemen's Readjustment Act (1944)." *Our Documents - Servicemen's Readjustment Act (1944)*, www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=76#.

¹¹ Margaret Myers, Report Vassar Veterans Committee Fall 1947, Subject Files, Folder 26.36, Vassar College Archives

the straight D record of another who was advised, “not to return in the fall.” Even for students who had never done any college work before they now found that they enjoyed the work; even more students found that they, “could actually do it.”¹²

The Miscellany News ran several articles about the veterans, their contributions to the classroom, as well as their activities within the student body on campus and around the surrounding community. Moreover, the veterans became more actively involved with the college when they created their own association to promote “the academic standards of the college; act as a unified voice for the veteran; and to see that all veterans are given an opportunity for a more expanded social life; and are eligible and given their full share of the benefits to which they are entitled under the provisions of the G.I. Bill”¹³ On one such occasion, after the formation of the association, the veterans hosted a dance at the college in the Aula, which was their first campus wide activity sponsored by their association.¹⁴ On December 19, 1947, the veterans hosted a Christmas party, “for the children of men who died while in service.” They organized for the children to receive individual gifts, and all veterans at the college helped participate in the program.¹⁵

¹² Minutes of Meeting of Veterans Committee, Mar 13 1949, Subject Files, Folder 26.39, Vassar College Archives

¹³ Constitution Of The Veterans Association, Subject Files, Folder 26.43, Vassar College Archives

¹⁴ V.C. Veterans News Clippings, Subject Files, Folder 26.38, Vassar College Archives

¹⁵ V.C. Veterans News Clippings, Subject Files, Folder 26.38, Vassar College Archives

An editorial in the March of 1946 issue of the *Miscellany News* elaborated on the positive aspects of having the veterans on campus. The former soldiers who had seen so much of the world would add to the scope of academic discussions, wrote the editors. The faculty also shared this sentiment when in one of their meetings a history professor recounted a story. In one of his seminars, the veterans kept the female students, “on their toes.”¹⁶ Another professor who worked in the laboratories commented on the ways the boys and girls worked together in “friendly cooperation but without sentimentality.” When a veteran student remarked to a fellow female student about having to solve an experiment, she replied with, “...that’s your problem brother!”¹⁷ (She continued with her work.)

All in all, the veterans program at Vassar at this time was for lack of a better word, successful. The students were treated as equals. Albeit, they were seen with a bit of a celebrity status. Many local newspapers and radio stations ran stories and articles about the “Men at Vassar.” even so far as to broadcast their life at Vassar on a show called “We The People.”¹⁸ However, this was more often seen as a badge of honor on the part of the veterans attending. For the college, a sign of their dedication to actually doing something for the returning veterans. In

¹⁶ Minutes of Meeting of Veterans Committee, Mar 13 1949, Subject Files, Folder 26.39, Vassar College Archives

¹⁷ Minutes of Meeting of Veterans Committee, Mar 13 1949, Subject Files, Folder 26.39, Vassar College Archives

¹⁸ William J. McCord, Letter to Chairman of the Veterans Committee, Jan 5 1949, Subject Files, Folder 26.41, Vassar College Archives

another report done by Margaret Myers, she recounts how the veterans were always grateful for the opportunity to study at Vassar. “A lot of people talk about doing something for the veterans, Vassar is the first civilian group that has really done anything for me.”¹⁹

Sooner or later all things come to an end, even for the first men at Vassar. Unfortunately, just as how the Trustees and faculty prepared for their arrival, the administration was already looking for ways to terminate the admission of any more incoming veterans. Most of the reasoning behind these decisions were because of a new college president, Sarah Gibson Blanding. She felt that the college interests were beginning to outweigh the needs of the veterans. In a meeting of the Board of Trustees in October of 1948, the general consensus of the board was that a “plan regarding the continuance of veterans at Vassar should be formulated in the near future consistent with our own interests as a women’s college.”²⁰ Moreover, by the fall of ‘49 and ‘50, most of the original veterans on Vassar had transferred to other institutions of learning or were almost ready to receive their diploma. In March of 1949, a meeting presided over by President Blanding, the veterans committee, which mostly consisted of representatives of the college and college professors, began to discuss options for a “resolution that no more male veterans should be admitted as freshman.”²¹

¹⁹ Margaret Myers, Report Vassar Veterans Committee 1949, Subject Files, Folder 26.36, Vassar College Archives

²⁰ Board of Trustees Minutes, Oct 12 1948, Vassar College Archives

²¹ Minutes of the Veterans Committee, Mar 13 1949, Vassar College Archives

Whether this decision was made on a purely financial matter could not be ascertained. The fact is that the college did not lose anything financially since the tuition was paid for by the federal government. Others have speculated that because the college felt the needs of returning veterans was completed, by the time the graduating class of 1950 was commenced, only two veterans walked in their graduation gowns to receive their diploma. In either case, the story of the first men to study and graduate at Vassar college lives on through the memories of those still alive today and those of current veterans on campus continuing their legacy of academic achievement and community involvement.

FORM 7-25M-HH4819

VASSAR COLLEGE

INTER-DEPARTMENTAL ONLY

DATE February 7, 1973

FROM Cynthia Mascioli
 TO Mr. Bartlett and Mrs. Scott
 SUBJECT Updated list of early male graduates

<u>Name and Class</u>	<u>Address</u>	<u>Diploma sent</u>
Mr. Themistocles G. Aposporos '50	4717 Boiling Brook Parkway Rockville, Maryland 20852	July 31, 1972
Mr. Edward Leo Brady '51	123 Carter Street Post Office Box 2515 Newburgh, New York 12550	July 31, 1972
Mr. Carmine J. Calenti '50	19 Kohlanaris Drive Poughkeepsie, New York	July 31, 1972
Mr. Joseph U. Damico '50	601 N. Pickett Street Alexandria, Virginia 22304	July 31, 1972
Mr. H. Quimby Heetzler '49	26 Essex Road Poughkeepsie, New York 12601	July 31, 1972
Mr. Kenneth W. Kaeli '50	27 Chestnut Street Rhinebeck, New York 12572	Feb. 7, 1973
Mr. William J. McCord '48	Ten Mac Intosh Drive R. D. 6 Middletown, New York 10940	July 31, 1972
Mr. Morris John Padovani '50	Box 184 Hunter, New York 12442	July 31, 1972
Mr. Jonathan Avery Slesinger '49	4650 North Morris Boulevard Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53211	July 31, 1972
Mr. Peter Theodoropoulos '50	1478 Virginia Avenue Redwood City, California 94061	July 31, 1972
Mr. O. Howard Winn '50	22-A Sheldon Drive Poughkeepsie, New York 12603	July 31, 1972

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A Newspaper for the Home
Information and Entertainment for Every Member of the Family

Poughkeepsie

Continuing and Succeeding the Poughkeepsie Star-Ex

Vol. LXVIII, No. 13

Poughkeepsie, New York

City Urged to Subsidize

Campus Scenes at Vassar College Graduation



Poughkeepsie New Yorker Photo

TWO MALE VETERANS enrolled at Vassar college under the G. I. Bill of Rights, received New York State Regents degrees of Bachelor of Arts at the 85th commencement exercises today at the

college. Marching in the commencement line with the girl students are HERMAN HOETZLER, left rear, of Poughkeepsie, and JONATHAN SLESINGER, of Croton-on-Hudson.



Warehouse Called To Act

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THE AUTH everything in growers and Phelps said the auth spur at sale ot



AN ENGLISH COMPOSITION CLASS SURROUNDED BY INFORMALLY ATTIRED FEMALE STUDENT

SPEECH-CLASS students, Stanley Siwek and Alice Colonna (*at the microphone*), make records of their voices in unison to play back for class criticism.



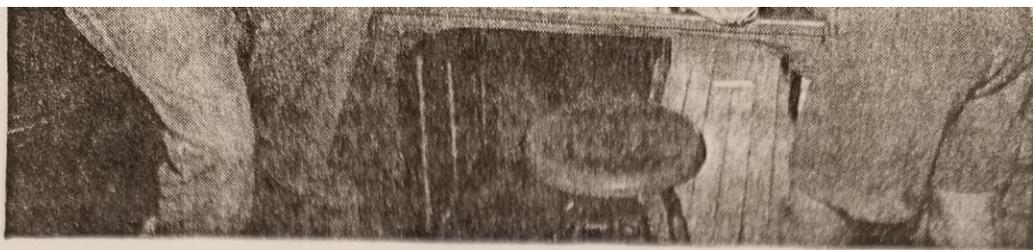
MEN'S RECEPTION ROOM is only place on the Vassar campus which is barred to girls. Here men can study, talk, get away from the ever-present girls.

Men at Vassar CONTINUED



ZOOLOGY CLASS has only one male student enrolled, René Cooper. Here he and his classmates stain onion epithelium to study structure of single cells.

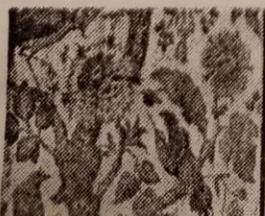




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SPEECH-CLASS students, Stanley Siwek and Alice Colonna (at the microphone), make records of their voices in unison to play back for class criticism.



PK N.Yar. Dec. 19, 1946

Vassar Veterans to Give Party For Children of Dead Soldiers

Veterans attending Vassar college under the emergency education program will be host to children of men who died while in service at a special Christmas party to be held Saturday afternoon at 2:30 o'clock, in the aula at the college.

Parents of the children are asked to telephone the college in order that arrangements for the fete might be completed.

The children will have a visit from Santa Claus and will be given individual gifts. A program of entertainment will be held and candy,

cake, and ice cream served.

All veterans at the college are cooperating in the program.

PK, N.Y. 9-12, 1947

Vassar Vets Hold Dance at College

More than 200 couples, attended a dance in Students' building, Vassar college, sponsored by the Veterans' association last night.

The dance, called the "hangover dance" by the sponsors, was the first campus wide activity sponsored by the Veterans' association, which is made up of veterans attending the college.

Scores for the entertainment were written by Margery Succop, class of 1948. She also arranged the dances for the Kit chorus composed of veterans, Vassar girls and a Yale quartet.

Music was furnished by Tony Bernazza, music major at Vassar, and the Top Hatters.

Burt Gold was general chairman. Committee chairmen were John Tompkins, decorations; Edward Stamm, entertainment; Russell Sheldon, refreshments, Edward Clark, chaperons and Milton Hecht, tickets.

This afternoon there will be an informal tea dance in the Aula.

T1945/46 (May)

- 3 -

The trustees expressed to the Treasurer their appreciation of his signal service in the preparation of the budget.

- 56 Henry Noble MacCracken Chair of English Literature. With reference to Minute #83 of the April meeting of the Executive Committee, and the Treasurer's reference to income for the ensuing year, on motion, it was Voted to establish the Henry Noble MacCracken Chair of English Literature.

The President expressed his appreciation of this honor.

It was the understanding of the trustees that a member of the Department of English would be appointed to the Chair for the ensuing year without increase of stipend.

- 57 Gifts. On motion, it was Voted to accept and to acknowledge with thanks the gifts listed in the report of the Treasurer.

The report of the Treasurer was accepted and placed on file.

- 58 ENROLLMENT OF VETERANS. There was discussion of the possibility of admitting veterans in the ensuing year. In connection with consequent over-crowding and limitation on enrollment of young women, Mr. Daniels suggested seeking public funds for expansion. On motion, it was Voted that Mr. Daniels be a committee of one to investigate the possibility of securing public funds and to give a comprehensive report to the Board at the earliest opportunity.

Dr. Rappleye warned the trustees that, if State aid were accepted, it would entail State representation on the Board of Trustees.

The President reported on a recent visit to the college of a group of men from Middletown, N. Y. (50 miles from Vassar), who had urged that Vassar should supervise an extension center for veterans which they hoped to start in the high school there. The Faculty Committee on the Admission of Veterans is not in favor of this project, and thinks it would be wiser to have next year an extension center in Poughkeepsie under the Board of Education, with late afternoon and evening classes at the high school. The State education authorities wish to have all extension centers placed under the auspices of neighboring private institutions. The President felt that extension centers in public schools was a wiser plan than that of continuing veterans at Vassar. It was

Voted that the Board of Trustees, in recognition of the seriousness of the situation, wishes to continue the policy of accepting veterans at Vassar College next year, and asks the Trustees' Committee on Faculty and Studies and the Faculty Committee on the Admission of Veterans jointly to consider

The next step is to secure a person who can take leadership in developing the curriculum for the school, who will be concerned with publicizing its program, and who will be in a position to recommend permanent and part time personnel for the teaching. The President hopes to elicit the interest and cooperation of Mr. Goodrich in this task.

- 8 Suggestion of Committee on Students' Records. The faculty passed on to the Board for its consideration a suggestion made by the Committee on Students' Records that some statement be included in the catalogue requiring conformity to the general regulations of the college regardless of religious practices. It was the sense of the meeting that no such statement should be included in the catalogue and that any similar cases should be taken care of individually in the future.
- 9 Report of Veterans' Committee. The Veterans' Committee presented a report to the faculty on October 6, making certain recommendations looking towards the gradual elimination of men veterans from the student body of the college. This report was voted down. There was a general feeling in the Board that a plan regarding the continuance of veterans at Vassar should be formulated in the near future consistent with our own interests as a woman's college and the continuing needs of the veterans. On motion, it was
Voted to empower the Executive Committee to act after a further report from the faculty.
- 10 Recommendations of Executive Committee. On Friday, October 10, a joint meeting of the Executive Committee and the Faculty Committee on Conference with the Trustees was held at the President's House. The two matters under discussion were Vassar College Fellowships and interim additional compensation. The President reported the recommendations of the Executive Committee resulting from this conference.
- 11 Vassar Fellowships. In view of the unanimous opinion of the faculty that Vassar Fellowships were of great importance in the academic life of the college as well as furnishing incentive and encouragement to able young women to enter upon graduate work, on motion, it was
Voted to include in the budget for 1948-49 the sum of \$3,200 designated for four Vassar Fellowships.
- 12 Interim Additional Compensation for 1947-48. The Conference Committee reported the need of the faculty for knowing soon what payment is to be made and when. The need

Works Cited

Vassar College Archives, Poughkeepsie, New York

“The Miscellany News.” *The Miscellany News*, <http://miscellanynews.org/>.

“Servicemen's Readjustment Act (1944).” *Our Documents - Servicemen's Readjustment Act (1944)*, <https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=76>.