

“We Were Pioneers”

A Lafayette College Archives EXCEL production
Scripted by Amanda Roth '04 and Kamaka Martin '04

“We Were Pioneers” celebrates the women and men who witnessed the advent of coeducation on campus and who redefined the Lafayette experience. This play, the result of a year and a half of research, interviews, and transcribing, is based on almost fifty interviews that have been conducted with alumni from the late 1960s and early 1970s by the Lafayette College Archives Oral History Project. Selections from interviews with current students have been added to demonstrate the relevance of certain topics to today’s campus environment.

Introductory Remarks

After two years of intense study, passionate debate, and reasoned discussion, women were admitted to the academic halls of Lafayette College in the fall of 1970. An institution proud of its 144 year history, its hallowed spot up on the hill, and its legacy as an all male college joined other single sex institutions such as Princeton, Wesleyan, and Yale in becoming a fully integrated coeducational facility.

What was hailed by some as a great stride forward was lamented by others. While many students and faculty openly and vigorously supported the move to coeducation, convincing the entire alumni body and the full faculty and student bodies was often a tough sell. As College officials moved about the country meeting with alumni they heard arguments both pro and con on the subject.

Common were comments such as: “Many of these long haired fellows want to show off to the women and when girls and boys get together you are more apt to have disturbances and misconduct.” or “As an engineering school Lafayette has a great reputation, and I see no reason to change. There are plenty of schools for women and the average woman has no aptitude or desire to enter this field.” Many worried that the admission of women to Lafayette would alter the unique character of the school or that women would be a distracting element.

There were voices on the other side too. Advocates noted that “students in quality mixed groups achieve a higher performance, are more contented with the College, and have less complaints.” Advocates argued that the admission of women would improve the social life of the men at the College, as well as raising the academic bar.

A decision as important and history altering as this, admittedly, was never going to please everyone, but the Board of Trustees moved forward and announced in June of 1969 that coeducation was to happen at Lafayette. Some alumni threatened to withdraw their financial support. Others cheered. Some faculty fretted about women crying in their offices over bad

grades. Others welcomed the new opinions and voices that would be heard in their classrooms. For a while it seemed as if everyone held their breath.

So how would the transition to coeducation work? How would the Lafayette community react? “We Were Pioneers” tells part of this story through the voices of the men and women who experienced it firsthand.

As you read the script from this play remember that many of the things we take for granted on campus now were not in place in the fall of 1970. There was no place to house the 123 incoming freshmen and twenty-three women transfer students so New Dorm, now Ruef Hall was built. There was no Farinon Center. You could smoke in class. Fraternities ruled the social, dating, and eating scene, and there were no sororities. There was only one full time woman professor on campus. Prior to coeducation it was common practice for busloads of eligible women for neighboring colleges to be brought to Lafayette for date weekends. The birth control pill was ten years old, and in 1970 abortion was illegal. That would change with the landmark 1973 Supreme Court decision of *Roe v. Wade*.

The late 1960s and early 1970s was also a period of political protest, social consciousness, and campus activism. Fresh in the minds of incoming freshmen were the tragic events of May 4, 1970, when, during a Vietnam War protest, four Kent State University students were killed by Ohio National Guardsmen. Indeed, the war itself was very real for many members of the early coeducation classes. Some had lost friends from high school to the war. For some college was a way to avoid the draft. Others marched in protest against the war prior to coming to Lafayette.

Up until 1970 participation in ROTC was mandatory for Lafayette men. The mere presence of ROTC on campus was a source of agitation and tension, especially as opposition to the Vietnam War grew. While the level of political protest and activism on the Lafayette campus may have been relatively minimal compared to other schools, there was an element here who opposed the war, questioned the intentions of the government, and chaffed at authority.

Among the women who entered the Class of 1974 were fourteen African-Americans. They joined a rather small, but vocal and visible minority of African-Americans on campus that were defining their role and place. The ABC, the Association of Black Collegians, was but two years old, having been formed in the spring of 1968. In late October 1969 five black students spoke to a packed Colton Chapel and presented The Black Manifesto. They demanded an increase in the number of black students, faculty, and administrators on campus, the creation of a black house, more black studies courses, and an end to racism on campus.

“We Were Pioneers” will take you back to those days when women began to make an impact on campus life and culture at Lafayette College.

The Oral History Project (OHP) is part of Lafayette’s EXCEL Scholars Program. The OHP began in the spring of 2002 with three EXCEL Scholars: Vivienne Felix ’03, Amanda Roth ’04, and Kamaka Martin ’04, each of whom has contributed enormously to this project. One of the goals of the project has been to document the experiences of those members of the initial coeducation class at Lafayette, specifically the Classes of 1972-1975. To that end nearly fifty

individuals have been interviewed. Most of the interviews are with women alumnae, but some men from those classes, as well as a few faculty members and an administrator from that time period have participated in the project.

Amanda and Kamaka developed the idea for a play as a way to showcase their work. Using insightful, funny, and sometimes poignant excerpts from the interview transcripts Amanda and Kamaka scripted this production. They gathered together a cast of thirteen students and helped direct the show.

“We Were Pioneers” was presented to the Lafayette community on October 16-18, 2003, in the Marlo Room of Farinon Center. Over 250 people saw the production, and an additional thirty-five came to a shortened version which was presented on Homecoming weekend. Several of the alumni interviewed for this project were in the audiences.