



President Mary Pope M. Hutson '83
14th President of Sweet Briar College
Inauguration Speech
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Wow, what a day! I am so happy to see all of you, and I think God is smiling on Sweet Briar with this sunshine today. I am honored and grateful to be here with all of you at this time, celebrating Sweet Briar, its past, present, and the vision for the future. I'll speak today on why this college is a category of one, with our legacy, leadership, and vision for women's education at the very core for over 123 years. First, I wish to particularly thank Mason Bennett Rummel, our Board chair, for her inspiration and fortitude and all the members of the Board of Directors for their support and commitment to the College. I also greatly appreciate Board members Sally Mott Freeman and Kelley Manderson Fitzpatrick for their passion and commitment to the College throughout my time here, and co-chairs of the Inaugural Committee.

I want to thank Belle Wheelan for her friendship and decades of supporting education in all sectors and Phil Stone for his leadership for Sweet Briar, and his mentorship. I deeply appreciate both of their kind remarks. I'm very moved and humbled by what they each had to say about this college and about me personally. Also, to the staff that have been a part of the planning and fulfillment of this event, especially Rachel Pietsch for the precision and example of leadership you always possess and Lynette Arner and Rebecca Beard for their expertise in planning many of the events over the last three days, as well as the entire inaugural committee. And, of course, thanks to the staff in buildings and grounds and housekeeping who have worked tirelessly around the clock for this moment to celebrate the College. To our students, faculty, staff, and my fellow alumnae, I thank you for loving Sweet Briar with great passion and care each and every day, particularly during times of discussion and debate. A special salute to my dear friend, the Reverend Keenan Kelsey, for her spiritual encouragement and steadfast hand.

Thanks as well to the local, state, and federal leaders here with us. Your brave decision-making and strong leadership help us fulfill our mission. I also want to direct my deep and abiding gratitude for all of my family and friends who have supported me without reservation on this journey to serve Sweet Briar at this time, which some might say is an inflection point in the history of the College. So many of my family members, those here with me today and those who have come before, embody the best exemplars of what I aspire to emulate: service to others, moral fortitude, and courageous contributions to their communities. Thank you for

the gifts you've made and continue to bestow. To my fellow presidents who have traveled from near and far, Chris Stevenson, who is working to revive St. Paul's University; Lindi Dlamini of the Roedean School, a girls' school in Johannesburg, South Africa, who traveled all the way here today.

Special guests of women's colleges and alumnae of those colleges who fought valiantly to save what we hold dear: alumna representative Rhonda Chambers of Judson College and alumnae from Wilson College. Most importantly, today, I thank all of my fellow alumnae, those here in person, and those on the livestream across America and the globe. We celebrate each other and we celebrate each and every one of you for your contributions to the College.

Women's colleges remain so vital and relevant to our world today. In fact, we live in a time when we need the benefits of women's colleges, now more than ever. All women's colleges, what these institutions do, what they provide for their students, and what their legacies stand for are of paramount importance. Their contributions as a particular brand of educational institution that has been in existence since the 19th century will outlive the contributions of any of us as individuals.

Today, we shine a light on Sweet Briar College, its legacy, leadership, and vision for the future: this special place and its inspiring academic experience in an incomparable setting; the dedicated faculty and staff who give selflessly of their wisdom, time, and care for us and for future generations. I also want to highlight the alumnae legacy today, which holds various threads of brilliance that may largely remain unknown and uncelebrated until the history books are written. Why is that the case? I believe that the humility of our alumnae remains constant, even as their contribution is pivotal for so many communities that have been forever transformed, women from every community whose love knows no bounds. My fellow alumnae fought valiantly in 2010 to keep the College from going co-ed and then again in 2015 when it was time to save the College after an ill-advised attempt to close it. We fought to save the College, and we created a movement.

A movement, when fully deployed, will change the landscape of the standing of women in America and overseas. Many who approach me say that our alumnae base saved the College, and I remind them that every day we are still saving Sweet Briar because the levers of vulnerability in any small, private liberal arts college must be carefully balanced. Eternal

vigilance is required each and every day to focus on those practices, procedures, and policies that could, on any given day, turn a great year into a daunting year. At the end of the day, did we really focus on what we were saving? We were saving the education for women. This outcome is what we will continue to stand for and represent. Before I move into the vision for the future, please indulge me for a moment to say a few words about my personal journey.

After growing up — of all things — on a boys' boarding school campus (yes, that is true, and I live to tell the tale), my parents actually dedicated their lives to the education of boys and my father's two schools. So, let's talk about life being full circle. I visited Sweet Briar in my senior year in high school. That was 1978, and I fell in love with the campus, met the extraordinary women of the College, and knew this place; this very special place was where I would grow and find my voice. Back then, as a Latin student at Sweet Briar, I wondered about the words on the College's great seal: *Rosam Quae Meruit Ferat*. It was Sweet Briar's motto, as you have heard, "She who earns the rose may bear it." I liked the sound of that. If she works hard, she earns it. I worked very hard. My father might have said I could have applied myself more, which he might have said out loud after my first semester when I was heavily involved with clubs like Earphones and others and also attended probably way too many parties.

However, I did pass my comprehensive exam in international politics, graduated in 1983, and received a Sweet Briar rose. Over these past four decades, I have thought a lot about the rose as not just a thing of beauty or refinement, but as something that endures. That's the thing about roses — they're beautiful, and yet, if they are to endure, they require care and cultivation and can be very thorny. And as any gardening enthusiast will tell you, they require love. We mustn't forget that someone loved that rose before it came to you.

"Love" — there's a word. As I look around today, I see so many friends and sisters; dear hearts, I love you all, you who have also been bearing the rose. These rose bearers are still flowering after all these years, and yes, I think of the rose bearers no longer with us but with us in spirit, an eternal sisterhood that someday will embrace all of us.

On this campus, so familiar to me, and yet, at the same time, so fresh and compelling, I feel the enduring love of one woman in particular: Indiana Fletcher Williams. She was an independent woman, stalwart in her principles and committed to the future of this place. As you all know, she endowed this college in memory of her daughter, Daisy, who died when she was just 16. After Daisy's death, Indiana resolved that other young women would be, in a

philanthropic, educational way, her daughters. These new daughters would come here to Sweet Briar and learn the things that Daisy only started to know in her teenage years. Indeed, ever since, Sweet Briar women have had the opportunity in life that she never had. In this way, Daisy's dreams find life in your dreams. Daisy is buried on Monument Hill; her harp is in the museum and in need of restoration. Her diary exists and her curiosity and leadership are largely unexplored.

Some of us visited her memorial together last week on Founders' Day, and many others gathered have made the walk in past years. It's so beautiful up there. I never tire of my visits there, and every time I feel the presence of Indiana and Daisy and I'm filled with both awe and appreciation. As we all know, sometimes, out of tragedy (it's hard to think of anything more tragic than the loss of a child) comes an awesome beauty, beautiful as a rose. So we honor Indiana and Daisy when we bear the rose.

Today, I stand before you as the first alumna of Sweet Briar to hold this position. Mindful of the debt I owe to all my predecessors, to all the stakeholders, to the well-wishers and all those opposed, and to all the rose bearers, I pledge to help and guide with all the power I can summon, the next generation of rose bearers.

The leaders of Sweet Briar have shown us the way. One illustrious predecessor leaps to my mind: Sweet Briar's third president, Meta Glass. Almost a century ago, on November 13, 1925, she declared at her Inauguration ceremony that the challenge to the College and its students is how to make a harmonious whole out of the development of intellect, emotions, willpower, and their resultant character. President Glass further outlined the mission. *How may we blend the education offered in the different parts of our college to produce this quality of fruit as the plants grow?* That seems to me to be worth our great effort. It's interesting that she chose to dwell on fruit and plants, including, of course, the rose. It is worth a moment of reflection that back in 1913, Meta Glass wrote her Ph.D. thesis on the Roman poet Virgil and his extended poem, "The Georgics." The word means from the land, akin to geo in geology or geography. In fact, the name George or Georgia refers to farming and cultivation.

As you can imagine, President Glass was in her element here at Sweet Briar, indeed, a visitor to these thousands of acres then. And now, she would be so overjoyed with the innovations on the land, with its greenhouse and vineyards, apiary and honey harvesting, as well as all its managed meadows and forests, that she could be forgiven for thinking that we actually abide

here in some mystical, magical Avalon, enjoying our whole, natural foods where the cares of the world are very far away. This is indeed a wonder of a place. I hope you'll enjoy it as much as I have and do every day. And yet, the women of Sweet Briar aim to be consequential and have a positive impact on the larger world. What we gain here, we share. What we learn here, we use for the sake of uplift and betterment.

Alumnae and leaders of Sweet Briar, students experience it, and alumnae model these actions. Sweet Briar has always been fully engaged with the world, including in its troubles and tumults. The Spanish flu at Sweet Briar was a non-event and maybe a foreshadowing of what was to come 100 years later with COVID when the College navigated the global pandemic without incident. There is another shining example during the Second World War when President Glass was determined that women, too, would lead. She was instrumental in the formation of WAVS: Women Accepted for Volunteer Service. The predecessor to the full inclusion of women in the Navy and all of the U.S. armed services. She also went head-to-head — you'll love this — with the Navy brass in insisting that women would have the same color uniforms as men. Yes, she really did, and she prevailed.

There's more. One recent book, *Code Girls*, details the contributions of Sweet Briar alumnae, as well as many other women, made toward cracking the enemy ciphers, or codes, as we have known them to be. President Glass wrote back in 1943, "When the war was raging and the outcome not yet certain, Sweet Briar's useful usefulness today calls for alertness, insight, and courage."

"Courage" — there's another word. Sweet Briar women have met the test in the past and yet, every passing year poses some new test for this college and for those who bear the rose. We must be courageous as we face the larger world, open to civil and respectful dialogue and debate in keeping with the College's honor code and yet firm in our resolve to lift our voices and be women of consequence. The first of these resolutions is staying true to our mission — the education of young women — all the while protecting the safety and dignity of women. We will never waver on this. We pledge to always keep the faith with our roses. This is Sweet Briar's mission, and we will be true to honoring it, honoring our trust and our duty.

We realize that other schools have chosen other paths. We respect their right to do so. But if diversity means anything, it means multiplicity: different people and institutions seeking out different journeys. However, here at Sweet Briar, we have our unique answer. We have our

own proven model. We have a legal responsibility and a moral mandate to fulfill our mission for girls and women, and that's what we will do. We are fully committed to our mission. Moreover, we are fully confident that a great many girls and women, including alumnae and their families and fellow citizens, all see the value and wisdom of our course. This is the philosophy that will guide Sweet Briar during my tenure. Our role on behalf of girls and women reaching back more than a century, and yet, we can say to the world, together, we will balance fidelity and quality, diversity and sustainability so that all of you might bear the rose.

We are building new partnerships in the Commonwealth, the region, and around the world. For instance, we are particularly excited about our partnership with the Institute for World Politics in Washington D.C. IWP's president, Dr. Aldona Wos, has a profound vision of student opportunity, government service, and international leadership. This signals to many outside of Sweet Briar's gates that we are building on our legacy of government service and devoted to protecting freedom. Some of you who may not stand in this audience today, but you know who you are, have served our nation with distinction and our heroines on the front lines of oppression across the globe. Thank you for your service. Today, I've mentioned three founding figures of our heritage: Indiana Fletcher Williams, Daisy Williams, and President Meta Glass. Please indulge me while I tell you about one more consequential woman, Mary Wollstonecraft.

You might ask, "Who is she, and what does she have to do with Sweet Briar?" She has everything to do with Sweet Briar because she was ahead of her time, and her values align and resonate with Sweet Briar's mission. She is someone we should all know. She was born in England in 1759 and never visited America, and yet, her guiding spirit abides wherever women seek to flourish, especially to learn, especially at Sweet Briar. Growing up in a world where women had few education opportunities, she focused on educating herself and developing a formidable candor. As she wrote when she was a teenager, "I have a heart that scorns disguise and a countenance which will not disassemble." In *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, she added, "Judicious books, enlarge the mind, and improved the heart." To Mary, education was the equalizer. In the words of one of her biographers, "She did not want to grow up to be a tyrant like her father or a slave like her mother."

She had to discover for herself the right course to normal maturity. It was this desire for equality that led her to publish in 1792 *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. She wrote, "I do not wish for women to have power over men but over themselves. Indeed, women should

labor by reforming themselves to reform the world." In the words of one of Mary's many biographers, "Her charm was not the placid charm from which rises from beauty and graciousness alone. It was the positive, energetic charm of a courageous woman eager to serve humanity." Mary wrote of herself, "Surely something resides in this heart that is not perishable, and life is more than a dream." Mary passed away when she was only 38, and yet her works have never perished, her life proving to be much more than a dream. Today, more than two centuries later, her dream is our dream, and our ongoing work is truly a vindication of the rights of women.

I've mentioned four females, Indiana Fletcher Williams, Daisy Williams, Meta Glass, and Mary Wollstonecraft, living across three centuries, all speaking the same essential truth about the unique value of women. If you listen, even now, you will hear the soft whisper of timeless traditions at this college. You will also hear the voices of women who've worked and sacrificed to make it possible for you to be here and for us to be here together. In so gathering, we honor their trust and seek to burnish their legacy, helping it to shine all the more, forever. This wondrous campus will always be a sanctuary of safety for a women's core leadership curriculum, a learning laboratory for engineering, sustainability, and the arts, and a fortress for women. You'll make friends here that you'll hold close to you for the rest of your life.

Included in this will be the sisterhood of Sweet Briar women from generations, even centuries past. Then, in your mind's eye, you might think of all the sisters to come. That's the full continuum of eternity: rose upon rose upon rose. To the students, we pray that in the years after you graduate, you will return often, perhaps for a visit, perhaps to join us in our work, perhaps to bring with you a prospective student — a new bearer of the rose. But wherever you go and whatever you do, we trust that whatever titles and honors you might accumulate, you will always think of yourself, too, as a Vixen. Perhaps 40 or so years from now — or sooner — one of you will be standing where I am now. And yet, every Sweet Briar woman can be inspired by our guardian angels, Indiana and Daisy, Meta and Mary, and all of our other sisters. I have faith that they are smiling on us even now.

Here at Sweet Briar, we can bask in the warmth of their vision even as we lead and prepare to lead as a category of one; legacy, leadership, love, and courage are the foundation for the future. I see a future where Sweet Briar is once again the preeminent leader in women's education, where the quality of instruction is clearly reflected in the leadership roles played by its growing legions of graduates, where a restored and renewed, nationally significant campus

serves future generations, and a financially secure institution that is poised to meet any challenge that the future holds. As individual women and as a sisterhood, we form our grand procession, taking our movement forward to secure the future. We will bear the rose. Thank you.