

# PORTRAITS OF WOMEN FIRSTS

EAST DUKE PARLORS

DUKE UNIVERSITY

*In 1988, as part of Duke University's Sesquicentennial celebration as an institution, the Women's Studies Program chose twelve Duke women, among many, to honor as pioneers in their fields. These twelve women all set precedents at Duke in their specific areas of interest, yet they represent the history and tradition of women's contributions as a whole to the institution. The story of the sesquicentennial portrait project can be found at the end of the biographical statements.*

*In 1991, the portraits of the first women graduates in engineering were added to the collection. The portrait of Margaret Adams Harris was installed in September 1997. Most of these portraits hang in Room 119. Three oil portraits described below are located in Room 120; short biographies of Mary Duke Biddle and Roberta Brinkley are included here.*

## **Mary, Persis, and Teresa Giles - First Women Students**

The first women graduated from Duke in 1878, forty years after the institution opened as a Methodist schoolhouse in Randolph County. The institution was known as Trinity College when the three Giles sisters--Mary, Persis, and Teresa--enrolled. The sisters joined their brother at Trinity so that they could "really and truly" prepare themselves to be teachers. Although the three women were classified as "special students," reciting their lessons at the end of the day after the men had been dismissed, the Giles sisters completed the required curriculum and were graduated as regular seniors in 1878. The three sisters continued their education at Trinity, earning their Master of Arts degrees in 1885. Mary, Persis, and Teresa Giles used their education and training to establish Greenwood Female College in South Carolina. Today Giles, a dorm on East Campus, commemorates the achievements of the Giles sisters, the first female graduates of Duke. Their portraits hang in Room 119.

## **Mary Duke Biddle**

Mary Lillian Duke, born in 1887, was the daughter of Benjamin and Sarah Duke, who later became Mary Duke Biddle by marrying Anthony Joseph Drexel Biddle (1896-1961). She was born into a family tradition of generous concern for Trinity College and Duke University, and she added to this tradition splendidly. She graduated from Trinity College in 1907, and maintained a continuous interest in the college. Beginning in the early 1920s, she and her brother, Angier, made significant contributions to Trinity College. In 1922, for example, Mary Duke Biddle helped build the War Memorial Gymnasium, which served as the Woman's College Gymnasium, and is now part of the H. Keith H. and Brenda Brodie Recreation Center. In 1937, she befriended the Woman's College of Duke University by having room 120 of the East Duke Building redecorated and equipped with valuable furniture and art objects in the Louis XV style and by giving several note-worthy oil paintings to the Woman's College Library. In 1938, Biddle provided funding for the Sarah P. Duke Gardens, a memorial to her mother. After World War II, she gave \$1.5 million for the expansion of the West Campus Library (Perkins Library). Her will provided that Duke University should not receive less than one-half of the income from the residuary estate administered by the Mary Duke Biddle Foundation, to which she left the remainder of her estate. In 1960, this portrait was transferred with three other Duke family portraits (all hang in Lilly Library's Reference Room) from Four Acres, Benjamin N. Duke's home in Durham. This portrait now hangs in Room 120 above the desk.

### **Alice Mary Baldwin - First Woman Administrator**

As the number of women enrolling at Trinity increased, the need grew for an administrator to oversee the "special needs" of female students on a predominantly male campus. In 1923, Alice Baldwin arrived at Trinity as acting Dean of Women in the summer school. In 1924, Baldwin accepted the permanent position, Dean of Women to Trinity College, along with an appointment as an instructor in history, becoming the first woman to sit on Trinity's faculty. A graduate of Cornell University with a Ph.D. from the University of Chicago, Alice Baldwin was the first woman in the history of Duke to be a key administrator with a strong voice in both academic and student life. As Dean of Women, Baldwin worked to expand academic, social, and professional opportunities for women students. In 1924, James B. Duke established the endowment that transformed Trinity College into Duke University. With the construction of a new Gothic campus for men, Trinity's campus was remodeled and expanded in the Georgian style to house a coordinate college for women. In 1930, the Woman's College of Duke University opened its doors, with Alice Baldwin as its academic dean and head of the college. Under Baldwin's guidance, the Woman's College became one of the most well respected women's colleges in the South. Throughout her career as Dean, Alice Baldwin served as a dedicated counselor and as inspiration for excellence to all the women students. A formal portrait of Dean Baldwin that hung for many years in the East Campus Union is now in room 120 near the mirror. Baldwin Auditorium on East Campus was renamed in her honor upon her retirement in 1947. There is also a photograph of Alice Mary Baldwin in room 119.

### **Mary Grace Wilson - First Dean of Students, The Woman's College**

Mary Grace Wilson held the position of Dean of Students in the Woman's College from its opening in 1930 until her retirement in 1970, two years before the men's and women's colleges merged. A native of South Carolina, Mary Grace Wilson received her M.A. from Columbia University and held the post of Dean of Women at Durham High School before coming to Duke. In the early years of the college, Mary Grace Wilson served officially as social director for the students. As such, she assumed responsibility for the extracurricular lives of five hundred young women. Although her title changed often and the number of students tripled in her forty-year career at Duke, Dean Wilson's commitment to her students never wavered. As Dean of Students, Mary Grace Wilson counseled thousands of young women. During World War II, she advised a dateless female student not to depend upon men for amusement and instead recommended that the student rely on herself: "It's the secret of happiness all men know." In the turbulent sixties, Dean Wilson recognized the changes on campus and noted that the role of the college had evolved from establishing rigid social codes to encouraging individual freedom and responsibility. Wilson dormitory on East Campus, where she lived for all forty of her years at Duke, was renamed in her honor when she retired in 1970. Her portrait now hangs in Room 119.

### **Katherine Everett Gilbert - First Woman Full Professor**

When Katherine Gilbert joined the faculty in 1930, she became the first woman to sit on the Duke faculty as a full professor. A former Kenan Research Fellow at UNC, Gilbert received her Ph.D. in philosophy at Cornell University. Her research concentrated on the philosophy of aesthetics, and in 1941, she became the chair of the new department of art, aesthetics, and music. During the institution's centennial year in 1938, Katherine Gilbert organized the Woman's College celebration. The symposium gathered alumnae and outstanding women from across the country to discuss professional career prospects for women. One wing of the Gilbert-Addoms dormitory commemorates the outstanding achievements of Katherine Gilbert as a

Duke professor. Her portrait hangs in Room 119.

### **Margaret Adams Harris – First Woman President of Duke’s General Alumni Association**

Margaret Harris, who earned her B.A. from Duke University in 1938 and her L.L.B. in 1940, became the first woman president of Duke’s General Alumni Association in 1972, after the merger of the women’s and men’s colleges. A member of the university’s Board of Trustees from 1975-1987, Margaret Harris is distinguished for her involvement in Duke alumni affairs as well as for an outstanding record of work on behalf of the community of Greensboro, N.C. in the realm of public education. In addition to her service on the Board of Directors and as vice president of the Woman’s College Alumnae Association, Margaret Harris has belonged to the Duke University National Council and was a member of the committee which drafted the new constitution of the Alumni Association in 1970. She was elected vice president of the General Alumni Association, two years before acceding to the presidency. A native of Pennsylvania, Margaret Harris’s long-standing commitment to public education in the Greensboro community led her to become the first woman to chair the Greensboro City Board of Education. She has also served on the board of directors of the Guilford County Economic Opportunity Council, and has received both Greensboro’s “Mother of the Year” award (1967) and the Greensboro Outstanding Civic Leader award (in 1974). Throughout these years of volunteer service, Margaret Harris has successfully pursued a career as a practicing lawyer.

### **Marie Foote Reel and Muriel Theodorsen Williams - First Women to Earn the Bachelor of Science Degree in Engineering**

In 1946, Marie Foote Reel and Muriel Theodorsen Williams became the first women to earn Bachelor of Science degrees in engineering from Duke University. Marie Foote Reel entered the Woman's College in 1943 with the intention of studying Spanish and becoming a teacher. After discussing her plans with a friend whose father was an engineer, she decided to pursue a career in engineering and transferred to the School of Engineering in 1944. She graduated "magna cum laude" and became an Assistant Editor of *Electrical Engineering* magazine. During her career, she has served as an Instructor of Electrical Engineering at Texas A & M University and as Chief Specifications Engineer for DeLeuw Cather, the engineering design consultants for the Washington, DC Metro system. Muriel Theodorsen Williams entered the Woman's College as a Physics major in 1942. While at Duke, she learned that the Curtiss Wright Corporation was sponsoring a scholarship to train women as engineer's aides to replace men serving in the Armed Forces during World War II. Along with 99 other women, she entered a curriculum designed for women only at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. After completing the program, she returned to Duke and entered the School of Engineering. During her career she has worked as a statistician for the Minute Maid Corporation and as a consultant in the calibration of precision tools. Though these women broke the ground for women in engineering at Duke, it was some time before others followed their lead. Between 1946 and 1974, only 23 women earned their Bachelor of Science degrees in engineering from Duke. It was not until the advent of the women's movement in the late 1970s that women began entering the school in significant numbers.

### **Katharine Mary Banham - First Benefactor to Women's Studies**

Katharine Banham joined the faculty of Duke University in 1946. The first woman to earn a Ph.D. at the University of Montreal, Dr. Banham spent twenty years practicing as a clinical psychologist in her native England, and in Canada and the U.S., before arriving at Duke to establish the clinical program in the

psychology department. In her tenure at Duke, Professor Banham made many contributions to both Duke and Durham communities, including the establishment of the Child Guidance Clinic of Durham. From her retirement in 1967 until her death in 1995, she continued to show her dedication to Duke and the community through contributions to various organizations and scholarships. In 1985, she endowed the Anne McDougall Award for women committed to human service. Kay Banham stands as the first benefactor to donate funds specifically to the Women's Studies Program. When she endowed the award, Professor Banham wished to honor her friend Anne McDougall, the wife of the founder of Duke's psychology department, William McDougall. Anne McDougall offered support, friendship, and encouragement to women in the Duke community in the early years of the university. By recognizing the community service of a female student with the McDougall Award, Katherine Banham extended her support and encouragement of Women's Studies and women students at Duke University. Her portrait can be viewed in Room 119.

### **Roberta Florence Brinkley - Dean of the Woman's College**

Educator and administrator Roberta Florence Brinkley was a professor of English and Dean of the Woman's College at Duke University from 1947 until 1962. She was born in Augusta, Georgia, educated at Agnes Scott College (A.B., 1914), Peabody College for Teachers (M.A., 1919), and received her Ph.D. from Yale in 1924. Early in her career, she taught English in the public schools of Thomson, Georgia, and Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and was principal of the Winfield High School in Georgia. She taught at Goucher College from 1924 to 1947, serving as chair of the English Department from 1945 to 1947 and specializing in 17<sup>th</sup> century English literature. Goucher awarded her an honorary L.L.D degree in 1956. In 1947, she came to Duke to succeed Alice Mary Baldwin as Dean of the Woman's College, and served in that capacity until her retirement in 1962. She was an active researcher and author who wrote or edited five books and made numerous contributions to scholarly journals. She was also active in a number of scholarly societies, including serving as the president of both the Southern Association of College Women from 1953 to 1954 and the North Carolina Association of Women Deans and Counselors from 1957 to 1959. She was a member of the executive committee of the American Conference of Academic Deans from 1957-1960, and served on the Fellowship Awards Committee of the American Association of University Women from 1956 to 1961. She was the president of the Durham Branch of this organization from 1959 to 1961. Additionally, she was a member of the nominating committee of the Modern Language Association from 1960 to 1961. Her portrait is located in Room 120 above the marble-topped cabinet.

### **Juanita Morris Kreps - First Woman Vice President**

Juanita Kreps began her Duke career in the graduate school, completing her M.A., and then her Ph.D. in economics in 1948. She returned to Duke in 1955 as an instructor in economics, and in 1968 she became the last Dean of the Woman's College, overseeing the merger of the men's and women's colleges. In her thirty-three year tenure at Duke, Dr. Kreps has established unparalleled precedents as a "woman first" in many fields in both the private and public sectors. In 1972, Dr. Kreps was named James B. Duke Professor of Economics, the first woman to receive Duke's highest academic honor. At the same time, she became the first woman to sit on the board of directors of the New York Stock Exchange. In 1973, she served as the first woman vice president at the university, a post she held until 1977. In 1977, at President Jimmy Carter's invitation, Dr. Kreps became the first woman Secretary of Commerce and only the fourth woman ever to hold a cabinet position. Today, she is a trustee of The Duke Endowment and fulfills her duties as Vice President Emerita, continuing to be an outstanding example of women's achievements at Duke. Her portrait

is located in Room 119.

### **Estelle Flowers Spears - First Woman Trustee**

Estelle Flowers Spears served on Duke's Board of Trustees from 1952 until 1968, becoming the first woman in Duke's history to sit on the Board. Since members of her family had been students and officials at Trinity College and Duke University, the institutions had always been an integral part of her life. A 1914 "magna cum laude" graduate of Trinity College, Spears replaced her brother, Robert Flowers, who served as president of the university from 1940-1949, on the Board when he died. Prior to her appointment, Estelle Spears had been active in church, community, and university affairs. During her sixteen year term on the Board, there were many changes in the status of women in society and on campus. While a national women's movement began to gain momentum, plans were made at Duke to merge the Woman's College with the men's college. Although Estelle Spears cherished the benefits of the separate Woman's College, she recognized the need for greater coeducational experience in learning and living in order to prepare women for the advent of increasing business and professional opportunities. Estelle Flowers Spears holds the distinction in Duke's history of serving as the first woman trustee at a time when most American women were neither encouraged nor invited to hold prestigious positions outside the home. Her portrait hangs in Room 119.

### **Anne Firor Scott - First Professor of Women's History**

Anne Firor Scott joined Duke's history department in 1961 on a visiting appointment. Nineteen years later, she was named William K. Boyd Professor of History and appointed chair of the department. Professor Scott holds the distinction of being the first woman to chair the history department, yet she also stands as the first professor at Duke to include women's scholarship in her teaching and research. Her book, *Southern Lady: From Pedestal to Politics, 1820-1920*, was one of the first studies in what would come to be called "the new women's history," and the first to be based on close study of women's personal documents. Her current research focuses on the history of women's voluntary organizations. In 1987, a group of her former students and colleagues established the Anne Firor Scott Research Fund, an endowment to help support students conducting independent research in women's history. In the spring of 1989, the Women's Studies living group elected to name the dormitory in honor of Professor Scott. In the scholarship fund and the dormitory dedication, Anne Scott's students, friends, and colleagues honor the first professor at Duke to introduce scholarship on women into the curriculum. Her portrait is located in Room 119.

### **Ida Stephens Owens - First Black Woman to Earn the Doctor of Philosophy Degree**

Ida Stephens Owens completed her Ph.D. in Biochemistry and Physiology in 1967. The Carolina Times, in a front page story heralding the event, noted that Owens became the first Black woman to earn the Ph.D. at Duke, and the first woman ever to receive a degree in this field of study at Duke. A native of Whiteville, N.C., Dr. Owens graduated *summa cum laude* from North Carolina College, now North Carolina Central University. In 1975, as a member of the Laboratory of Development Pharmacology in the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, Dr. Owens initiated a research program investigating the drug detoxifying system that is now recognized for its studies on the genetics of human diseases. In 1981, this research program was extended and made into a permanent Section on Drug Biotransfusion, and Ida Stephens Owens was named Chief. Dr. Owens is recognized throughout the world for her work on drug

detoxifying enzymes. She has written key publications in scientific journals on the genetics of this enzyme system, and has been invited to speak at many international scientific conferences in this field. Dr. Owens currently serves as the Head of the Section on Genetic Disorders of Drug Metabolism, Human Genetics Branch, for the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development at the NIH. Dr. Owens is also a member of several leading scientific societies. Her portrait can be found in Room 119.

### **Janet Nolting Carter - First Woman Elected President of the Associated Students of Duke University**

In 1986, Janet Kay Nolting became the first woman elected president of the Associated Students of Duke University (ASDU). ASDU served as the student government of the entire student body between the merger of the women's and men's colleges in 1972 and 1993, when Duke Student Government (DSG) was formed. Although Janet Nolting believed she had the experience for the job, she did not feel the campus was ready for a woman president. In a letter of support, Margaret Taylor Smith '47, a former Woman's College Alumni Association president and then chair of the Council on Women's Studies, expressed the Council's concern about the absence of women leaders on campus. Margaret Taylor Smith urged Janet to run, citing her role as a principal organizer behind Duke's decision to divest from South Africa, her ASDU experience, and the respect administrators held for her. With the support of a network of alumnae and sorority sisters, Janet Nolting was elected president. In her year as president, Janet helped amplify the student voice in university policies, including opinions on the new curriculum. Janet graduated in 1988 with a double major in history and religion. While teaching at a preparatory school in Pennsylvania, Janet obtained her Master's degree in Education from the University of Pennsylvania. She then went to McCormick Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois on a full scholarship as a Patterson Scholar. During her time at the seminary, she served as a student pastor at Yorkfield Presbyterian Church in Elmhurst, Illinois, and met her husband Kent Carter, whom she married in May of 1994. She graduated from the seminary in June of 1996 with the Tressler Scott Fellowship for Applied Christianity, the Theology Award, and the Andersen Award for Theology. The latter she received as the result of a paper entitled "Closing the Gap Between Theology, Polity, and Practice: Women and the Call Process," which she coauthored. She was ordained as a Presbyterian minister on September 22, 1996, and currently serves as Associate Pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Topeka, Kansas. Her portrait is located in Room 119.

### ***History of the Portrait Project***

*The original portrait project evolved over a year-long period. The first steps we took were the result of comments by students, faculty, staff, and alumnae about the need to recognize women's contributions to the history of the University. After much discussion with university members, we concluded that hanging portraits of the women was an appropriate way to recognize these important contributions. Deciding whom to recognize and what accomplishments to single out became a complicated process. We listened for the names of women whom alumnae and staff remembered, we read about the contributions of women, and we thought about which accomplishments should be recognized. Next, we combined lists of women's contributions throughout Duke's history with lists of key roles that we thought should be recognized. We approached the women themselves, and in some cases, their families. We searched in University records for files and photographs. We contacted offices and individuals to verify our facts and to request additional photographs and information. Finally, we purchased frames fitting the decor of the East Duke Parlors, reproduced diverse photographs in standard form, and worked with university officials to hang the finished products. Duplicates of the visual and written materials we located in our search are now housed in*

*University Archives as a permanent file for future research of women's contributions to the life of Duke University.*

**Compiled by Melissa Hendrix and Jean O'Barr, December 1988.**

**Revised by Cynthia Banks-Glover, December 1995.**

**Revised, by adding information about Mary Duke Biddle and Roberta Florence Brinkley by Laura Noonan, October 2001.**