When people find out that we were students at Bryn Mawr, they often ask what is it like to teach at the school you graduated from! There isn’t a quick answer to this question, in part because what I would say is, “I wouldn’t know!” The Bryn Mawr I graduated from is so fundamentally different from the Bryn Mawr that I teach at, that one might go so far as to say that they really aren’t the same place at all. The school has transformed itself in its many key historical moments, leaving behind the echoes and memories—the legacy—of earlier versions—while adding in the new, the school, like all good institutions, is in a continual process of revision. There has never been one “true” Bryn Mawr or one finite moment of founding.

Even Founders Day itself is a relatively new tradition—it didn’t exist at all 35 years ago (when Dr. Riley was here)! When we gather on Founder’s Day, we think of ourselves as celebrating a moment in time—an institution is created, it exists and here we are 135 years later celebrating our school’s success, its long history, its continued, enduring existence in time and space! We think in terms of sameness—there is a fixed Bryn Mawr School—and we often go back to the Founders, not only to celebrate them, but to understand who we are and what we are doing here. Yet as Dr. Riley and I think about our long experience with Bryn Mawr, what stands out to us is not an entity, trapped in time, bound by the past, but a dynamic, evolving, alive institution constantly adapting to the world outside, trying to meet the needs of students in whatever present we inhabit. What is exciting about Founder’s Day is that we are reminded of that ever-changing history of the school and we are invited to take part in the process of change.
Working on the history of the school has only reinforced our sense of Bryn Mawr as an evolving institution that has had to balance real-world economic drivers with a progressive spirit!

So how has Bryn Mawr evolved from my perspective? I graduated forty years ago, and those sitting here today have walked through a campus that didn’t exist when I was a student. Imagine this: There was no North Building, no Little School, no dance studio, no Centennial Hall; the Howell Building was much smaller, and the fireplace in the Commons Room was actually the center of the old library; I spent a lot of time reading in the chairs before that fireplace, staring up at the portrait of Edith Hamilton—which now hangs in the corner of the new library entrance, but at that time was placed above the fireplace and above her famous quotation “Civilization is the Delight in the Things of the Mind”—while I didn’t know it at the time--that oil portrait of Edith Hamilton the scholar would come to mean a great deal to me. As a graduate student in history in the days when there were very few women in that field, I sat in many rooms hung with portraits of male scholars--this could have been intimidating, but for me it wasn’t--I always carried with me that sense, embodied in Miss Hamilton’s portrait--that I was part of a great lineage of female scholarship! And I have always felt grateful to Bryn Mawr for its ongoing celebration women’s minds. There were no seats in the auditorium when I was here; we sat flopped on the floor, always wanting to lie down, with teachers standing in the back, glaring at our slumped bodies, willing us silently to sit up straight. Gilman’s auditorium, with its comfy seats was a real contrast--it was clear how much more money the boys school had than we did, and subliminally it was also clear that boy’s voices and experiences were perhaps valued more highly.
The school was also far less diverse than it is today. When I look out at my classes, I see students from a wide variety of backgrounds and countries. But when I was a student, there were no exchange programs, no international students, and diversity was still thought of primarily in terms of Jewish students. My class had four African-American students—and that was considered serious diversity; there were no Asian students at all, and classroom attempts to reach beyond the majority centered on the issue of anti-semitism and the Jewish experience in America. We read Chaim Potok in English class, and talked a lot about the sufferings of state of Israel still reeling from the “1973 war. But we didn’t get off of school for the Jewish holidays, and before every Christmas break we had a Tableau—in which a large part of the upper school reenacted the nativity scene in silence while passages were read from the Bible—I was the narrator for two years—and I can’t remember a single moment where anyone questioned whether it was wise to put on a religious reenactment or to use the term “Christmas vacation.” Harder to express in just a few sentences is that the school was only just beginning to diversify its white student body. A large number of students, and the classes were much smaller then, came from the surrounding areas of Roland Park, Ruxton, Homeland and Guilford, and the very few students we had from “far away” in Harford County expressed feeling isolated, different and like they didn’t fit in. Adults tended to reinforce the division between “old girls” whose mothers, sisters and cousins had attended Bryn Mawr and everyone else. I had a friend who came in ninth grade so her father could work at Johns Hopkins, who was referred to as the “new girl” by teachers and coaches until she graduated four years later. Parents also reinforced this mentality, often asking as an opening question who your parents were and where did you live? Nodding if you gave the right answers, and looking slightly less enthusiastic if you didn’t. Looking back, the
school was clearly beginning to diversify, but by our standards, very little of that process had actually occurred, and there was almost no support system-no CAFE, no E3 day, no diversity director and not one affinity club existed when I was a student here.

Unlike Dr. Riley, much of the physical spaces of today’s campus existed when I was a student here in the late ‘90s and early 2000s. What strikes me is the shifting uses of these spaces and how that reflects our changing student body and educational philosophy. When I walk through the new Student Center, I find myself tracing where spaces used to be: old hallways and rooms that are now repurposed or erased and written over. It’s an odd space and an odd feeling: the same structure, but different, a preserved exoskeleton with a new organism living inside. As alums who teach here, we experience this a lot: the echo of two-in-one, an old memory papered over with the current reality, ghosts of the past looking over our shoulders into the present. The Student Center has plenty of room for ghosts. Created in 1949, it’s undergone numerous revisions, reimaginingings, and rebuildings (1987, 1992, 2019). Even before it was “the student center,” this was a crucial hub of campus, offering students space to perform, eat, exercise, and hang out. The Gym Lobby, most recently known as the junior class’ space, was, in an earlier incarnation when I was a student, unofficially a popular place for the African American students to congregate and relax with each other. During play rehearsals, theater kids owned that corridor between the cafeteria and Centennial Hall. The part closest to Northern Parkway has served, just in my memory, as the Athletic Department and trainers’ Office, the nurses’ office, and the Resource Center. (Imagine walking essentially to the edge of campus if you wanted help with an English essay or a math test!) Spaces shift as needs do and as the campus and its students grow,
we revise, copying and pasting, papering over, tearing out and building up. But always, the memory of the past lingers on, reverberating through our current experiences.

Sometimes those pasts affect us even when we don’t necessarily know about them. When I came to Bryn Mawr in the sixth grade, I was in awe. Coming here on financial aid, I knew (my parents made sure I knew), that I was privileged to be here, that very few people got to experience the beauty and joy and challenge of this place. As soon as I walked onto campus, though, I knew I was home. This was my place. I fit here in a way I hadn’t anywhere else; Bryn Mawr made space for me to be my weird, introverted, intellectual self. Searching for validation of that sense of belonging, I tried to immerse myself in the past, to almost dissolve myself into Bryn Mawr’s history, to make its identity and my identity one. One day, I was walking down the portico, thinking to myself how proud the founders would be of me--I loved school and I loved Bryn Mawr. And then I stopped, dead in my tracks, halfway between Garrett and Hamilton, because I realized, no, actually the founders wouldn’t have wanted me at their school at all. I was Jewish, for one, and for another, I was on financial aid. In some ways, I was their ideal student but in 1885, I wouldn’t have been an ideal student at all. That realization hit me hard. But almost immediately on the heels of that rejection, I thought, “Well, joke’s on them. I’m here and I’m awesome and this is my place.” I was able, eventually, to assert my own identity as part of Bryn Mawr without subsuming myself within the school. I was staking a claim, asserting that I was as much an essential part of Bryn Mawr as those long-ago founders who, perhaps, wouldn’t have wanted me. I was, although I didn’t know it yet, re-making the history of Bryn Mawr, first as a student and later as a teacher.
Two years ago, along with other faculty and students, we began investigating the history of Bryn Mawr beyond the well-known story of the founders. Working on this project, we learned that the history of the school which we both experienced in such different ways, is very nuanced, complicated, and often unexpected. For example, whereas Dr. Spector-Marks assumed as a student that no Jews were admitted in the early years of the school and I knew Jewish students to be the “new” minority in the 1970s, in fact, we both learned that the founders disagreed about whether or not to admit Jewish students. After much conflict, the school admitted its first Jewish student in 1886, the year after the school was founded, although an unspoken quota remained for years. We assumed that all the founders would have been antisemitic, whereas, in fact, they were divided on the topic. And while the Founders fiercely championed women’s rights, they were also quite conservative in their restriction of their own faculty’s behavior. One candidate was not hired because she had short hair, there was concern about teachers riding bikes to school and another teacher was fired for being considered “fast” by the standards of the time. This was not because the founders necessarily disapproved of these behaviors, but because they were concerned about the school gaining a negative reputation amongst a more conservative clientele.

Like many reformers, the founders had to choose between achieving their goal or staying true to all of their feminist ideals. One founder said, “the school is so revolutionary ...that I do not know whether our headmistress or secretary could afford to differ from other people in non-essential trifles which arouse prejudice.” (P 42). Bryn Mawr was such a radical project in its time that the founders privately worried constantly about alienating a skeptical public. They were historical
figures working within the confines of their own present. As such, they had to choose which battles they were going to fight and which they would leave to future generations.

The past never leaves a clear legacy of good or bad. Any one event or decision can be complicated, with multiple factors and parties involved. For instance, the decision to leave the original school in the city and move out to the suburbs in Roland Park was hotly contested: while parents and the headmistress had been advocating for this move for years, the remaining founders saw it as a betrayal of their original educational vision. The move was motivated by two impulses, the one: to provide students with a healthy, beautiful green space and a “homelike” nurturing environment and the other: to escape from Baltimore City, which was increasingly perceived as overrun by African Americans, immigrants, and the industrial working class. One of these is an admirable impulse that echoes our current whole girl/whole day educational philosophy and the other has left a legacy of segregation that we’re still working to overcome. A similar tension is apparent in the integration of the school. When Bryn Mawr made the decision to integrate in the early 1960s, its proponents defended integration in explicitly Christian language. In January of 1962, Katherine Van Bibber made the announcement of the school’s integration to the student body at prayers, a regular communal time held every day. The “special” Bible verse she chose was Paul’s epistle to the Corinthians in which he wrote “In this new man of God’s design there is no distinction between Greek and Hebrew, Jew or Gentile, foreigner or savage, slave or free man. Christ is all that matters, for Christ lives in us all.” Immediately following this, van Bibber announced that the Board had decided to admit all qualified students, regardless of race. It’s ironic that the decision to allow racial diversity within the school was defended on grounds that ignored any religious diversity. Yet Van Bibber knew
that in the 1960s, this was the most effective way to reach the majority of her audience. We would not use that rhetoric at Bryn Mawr today, because it would alienate or exclude much of our community, but it was useful at that time.

What do we take from the past? What do we leave behind? How do we choose what we wish to emulate and what we wish to reject? And when we are faced with the complexity of living beings, who are never entirely good and rarely entirely evil--how do we choose what we do with their legacy? Everyone’s answers to these questions is going to differ. Some prefer to burn the bridges to their past, others to whitewash over it, still others to continue to feel a nostalgic connection while intellectually remaining critical. We’re not here to provide answers for you. What we hope we’ve done is tell you a bit more about Bryn Mawr’s many, sometimes contradictory, pasts. There is not one Bryn Mawr to honor, there are many Bryn Mawrs to try to understand. Then you may choose how you wish to move forward into Bryn Mawr’s future.

One day, you will return to Bryn Mawr and find its physical spaces altered, its people changed, and its focus shifted even as it remains recognizably your school. You will stand on campus, feeling the ghosts of your past echo against the present--you will have changed and so will the school. Yet suddenly you may see how the school shaped you and has become a part of you, even as you have become a part of it. Our hope for you is that you will engage actively in making your Bryn Mawr, one that meets your needs and is an enduring school for future generations. Just as there is no one Bryn Mawr, but many, there are not five founders whose past ideas matter, but all of us whose present initiatives will shape the future. Each of us is a founder at Bryn Mawr and we continue building Bryn Mawr every day.