Ephly Comforts

A Portrait of Dorm Life at the Turn of the Century

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INTRODUCTION

No matter how much we might complain, it’s remarkably easy to be comfortable indoors as a student these days on Williams College campus. Our rooms are heated and insulated, the lights come on when we flip a switch, and there’s a bathroom and source of fresh water in every hall. We have access to a variety of food and study spaces throughout the day and most of the night. College policy has had a strong hand in making this comfort accessible to everyone - financial aid packages that cover tuition, room and board guarantee that all students can eat, sleep and hang out in the same places and pay up discreetly on the term bill. College policies also enforce rules on our lived environments - items with open flames or certain heating elements are banned, as are guns, pets, and drugs. But it hasn’t always been this way. Just as Williams has grown and changed as an institution of learning, so too have the daily lives of its students.

This project focuses on the earliest years of the 20th century, the time in which electricity - that great beacon of modernization - first arrived on Williams campus. The renovations it spurred ushered in a whole host of changes in the lived environment, and started an era of expansion for the college. My goal is to create a portrait of the way students lived out their non-academic lives - pulling from various and far flung sources to provide an understanding of the quotidian realities that were unremarkable in their time, but fascinating to us over 100 years later.

WELCOME TO WILLIAMS

In 1905, Williams had a total student body of 448, and 48 professors. Combined, people directly involved with the college only made up 10% of the population of Williamstown.

There were six dormitories owned by the college, with capacity for 211 students, since living in fraternities, renting a room in town, or living with a local family as a boarder was very common. Of the six, West, Morgan and East have retained both their names and purposes; South has been renamed to Fayerweather, Jesup has been repurposed and College, a dorm and dining hall where Stetson now is, was torn down in 1912. The majority of the rooms were doubles, or even triples. It was advised that students find their own roommate before the start of term, otherwise they would simply be assigned to room with the next person on the list.

Where one slept and ate often shook out along economic lines. Renting a room in town was generally twice as expensive as renting from the college. In this time of transition to modernity, certain dorms were much more desirable, for reasons I’ll go into later, and thus cost significantly more to rent. Students on “beneficiary aid” (financial aid in modern terms) were expected to room in the cheaper dorms and could have their scholarship revoked for living an expensive lifestyle, letting their grades drop, or “imbibing in intoxicating liquors.”

A helpful section at the back of the 1905-06 Course Catalog laid out a budget for what incoming students should expect to pay, with separate columns for students on beneficiary aid and for those from wealthy families. The gap in room rent is impressive: $36 is about $905 in today’s money, and $160 is around $4025. Also of note, students had to pay for their own light, but I’ll come back to that later.

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Rising Prestige

Williams was quickly becoming more expensive in this era as it gained a reputation and as an increasing number of wealthy alumni sent their children and grandchildren here. Wealthy students also expected better accommodations and more goods and services, driving the economy of Williamstown. Alumni-sponsored scholarships increased as well, but not enough to match rising costs.
So, What Could your $36-$160 Get You?

Quite a lot, comparatively. 1903 to 1906 were the years in which steam heat and electricity finally arrived in all the dormitories and academic buildings, and it made a world of difference. At the beginning of 1903, three dorms had steam boilers, but East, South and College (the dorms for students on beneficiary aid) still had coal stoves to heat the rooms and studies. College President Franklin Carter spoke at length during the 1901 Commencement speech about the need for a central steam plant. He railed against the hassle and inevitable filth caused by coal stoves: “The use of stoves in the rooms, with the incessant carrying of coal and ashes up and down the stairs incident to its use makes the entries un- tidy and often offensive.” In addition, he recognized that a central steam plant could lower the risk of fire (and insurance premiums), bring down the cost of fuel and new buildings, and safeguard against individual boilers malfunctioning.

Central steam heating wasn’t a particularly new technology - the college had been talking of building a plant since the 1880’s - but an economic downturn and the more pressing issue of retrofitting and expanding the sewer system sidelong the issue. But finally, work began on a coal-fired central steam plant in the summer of 1903 and by the next year all the buildings were outfitted for steam heat and electric light, which was brought in through the same tunnels. Previously, dorms had been lit by a combination of gas lights and kerosene or oil desk lamps.

These changes were certainly welcome, but I’m sure many balked at the increase in room rent they led to. Only one year before, during the 1903-04 school year, room rents started at $16, meaning that it was raised $20 ($503 in today’s money) from one year to the next. The 1905 Record article advising of the price increase stated that the increase was justified since now “Rooms rate includes steam heat, bathroom and lavatory conveniences with limited janitor service.”

The exact details of what “bathroom and lavatory conveniences” meant have been lost to history, since apparently no one at Williams thought to take photographs or write lengthy descriptions of their bathrooms. Which is a shame, but we can piece together a general idea.

Outhouses by West, and East appear on early maps, but since it’s known that massive renovations in plumbing took place during the late 19th century, we can assume that by 1903 bathrooms had moved inside and were equipped with flush toilets and at least cold running water. It seems there was only one large bathroom per dorm, located in the basement, because in November 1904 Morgan was heavily damaged by fire and the most anticipated improvements during reconstruction were the addition of bathrooms on every floor. From a Record article titled “Architects Plan for Williams”: “Lavatories and shower baths will probably be installed upon each story of the two wings and in the central portion a large toilet room may be built upon the top floor.” Since Morgan was always one of the nicer college-owned dorms, it’s safe to assume that cheaper dorms like East were also limited to a single communal bathroom in the basement or ground floor.

For a clearer picture of what those bathrooms may have actually looked like, there is a slightly more descriptive record of bathing facilities in Lassell Gymnasium. The 1902-03 Course Catalog, after extolling the fineness of their “pulley-weights of the best pattern, adjustable to varying strength, light Indian clubs, dumb bells, both of wood and iron, horizontal and parallel bars, rings and apparatus for developing special muscles,” makes note that the gym is also “provided with hot and cold wa-
ter, tub, sponge, and shower baths, and three hundred and seventy lockers.” Given the number of lockers, it can be assumed that a large percentage of the student body used the gym to exercise and wash. A 1904 Record article advocating for the installation of a swimming pool hints that not all students were satisfied with the state of the “tub, sponge and shower baths.” An irate, anonymous writer states: “The condition of the baths is too well known by everyone to require much mention. It is certainly such as to call for prompt attention. Such antiquated, unsanitary arrangements ought not to be tolerated for a moment at any institution.” It would have been much appreciated if he had mentioned what condition the baths were in, but imagination will have to suffice.
Getting Fed

Eating actually cost significantly more than renting a place to live for students. People back then spent a higher percentage of their income on food compared to today, and so a lower-income student could expect to spend about $144 which translates into $3623, while someone with more money could eat for a year on $216, or $5435. Within this range though, students had many options for getting fed. The college ran one large dining hall out of College Hall that was called the “hash house” by students, meaning that it only served leftovers that had been chopped up and re-fried with potatoes.

Quoted one student, “The college boarding house may be an ornament to this institution but it is a very poor place to go if you are hungry.” A visitor to the college in 1901 disagreed and thought the food was just as good as any normal hotel food. When he had gone and eaten with the students at breakfast time, he was quite impressed with the “oatmeal with fresh milk, beefsteak, two kinds of potatoes, four kinds of bread, coffee, etc.” It all sounds pretty bland to me, but in this era before refrigerated shipping containers and complex global trade agreements, no one expected fresh pineapple in the salad bar year round.

Eating arrangements were actually a lot more diffuse than they are today. Students kept tabs at diners and restaurants, or with local families who served meals as an additional source of income. Fraternity members ate in the dining rooms of their houses. There are also signs of dorm room cooking taking place. An item called a chafing dish appears, on tables and in corners, in several photographs of room interiors from the era (There’s one in the cover photo if you can find it!). Consisting of a removable skillet over a flame powered by a canister of liquid fuel, they’re still used for camping and catered events, but back in the day they were quite popular for making small meals and snacks. A 1896 cookbook published by the Jewett Chafing Dish Company contains a variety of recipes for fish, shellfish, game, meats, mushrooms, and details thirteen ways to cook eggs. It was published in nearby Buffalo, New York, so it is probably a good reflection of the readily available ingredients in Williamstown at the time, and the culinary landscape doesn’t sound particularly appetizing. The flavoring agents rarely fall beyond milk or cream, butter, salt, pepper, and alcohol, and most things are to be served over toast. Variety comes in the much greater diversity of animals and animal parts that were seen as normal to eat at the time. The Jewett cookbook has quick and easy recipes for frog legs, calf brains, green turtle steak, and a slightly more involved, but worthwhile recipe for Squirrel Ragout. It’s fun to imagine what sort of 1 a.m. meals students cooked for themselves while studying for finals.
“It would do your hearts good to see my room - not. It certainly is a mess, I took one good look at it and - fled. I've decided to wait till Fred gets over that hunting trip before I begin to excavate among the debris. [...] I am eating over at Dodds, had two meals there Friday and one this morning. it is, as far as I can judge, much better than at [Eillsons/Eidsons], because the grub is cooked so much better and the variety, they tell me, quite a muchness greater. Quite a few of the faculty are eating there now, also some queens(?), so it has quite a lively aspect.”

A Letter from Robert Frankin Wood '04, to his brother Horace. Dated March 21, 1903.

“I didn’t mention in my last letter and so I will tell you now that we have a mascot. It is a cat, and I will tell you about it. In the first place, it is a kitten, neat and homely. It is black and white, with a blotch on its nose and looks as if someone had spilled flour all over its black spots. We call her “Schapps” because a visitor said she had a regular beer-face, and so her name means beer. It is the stupidest cat I ever saw but is correspondingly affectionate since it won’t play a bit, except with its food, but it will take a piece of meat and bat it all over the room. It sleeps on a pile of dirty clothes under the bed, and as it was her own choice and a good place we haven’t disturbed her. We pinch milk and meat from the coop for it to eat, and bring the stuff up here in bottles and boxes. We hope it won’t get killed. John Buck shot at a cat and the bullet went right through the cat and hit a tree, and rebounding lodged in his left eye, just failing to penetrate the brain.”

This letter has a charming voice, and also gives hints of how East dorm might have been a bit more lawless back in the day. In a few short lines, this letter tells us that there seem to have been no enforced rules on keeping pets or guns in rooms - and that college students with messy rooms and a love of booze-related nicknames have been around for at least 110 years.
Sources

The files, shelves, microfilm and expert archivists and historians at:
The Williams College Archive
The Williamstown Historical Museum

Many numbers and direct quotes came from two volumes that have been compiled
by the College Archives:
The Williams College Course Catalog 1900-06.
The Record 1904-05

For more ways to cook squirrels etc. in your room, check out:
Jewett, John C. The Jewett chafing dish with a collection of recipes for chafing-
OL2521088A%2FJewett_John_C._manufacturing_co._Buffalo.&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=
AFQjCNFhRUNUKktrpR4jTYF9pHDyfhIOtw>