The Evolution of Mount Holyoke's Dining Hall: SuperBlanch, how did we get here?

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Course: ARX 340: Taking the Archives Public, Smith College

This spring semester of 2018 Mount Holyoke College has undergone tremendous change following the completion and opening of the Community Center and Dining Commons, informally known as SuperBlanch. A $50 million project launched by the Trustees, it is, largely, all anyone can talk about. This shift prompts the questions, where did dining at Mount Holyoke start, and how did we get here? Was there another time in Mount Holyoke’s history where big changes took place concerning dining? This archival capstone project examines the relationship of students and labor through the evolution of dining on campus. For this presentation, I will focus particularly on the vast changes that are evident between 1837 and 1915. How did the definition and characteristics of being a student at this college changed in relation to the manner that students convened for meals? What were the causes for large-scale changes during that time, and how do these shed light on our current situation?

The Mount Holyoke Seminary stands as our foundation, and is the epitome of a tight ship run by Mary Lyon, who personally maintained an equal share of chores for all students, who she considered daughters. Letters exist from students at the seminary, as they wrote home about their exhausting days, and all that they accomplished. In a letter to her sister, in November of 1837 Elizabeth Bull writes, “Miss Lyon has spared no pains to make us as comfortable as possible, and she wishes to consider us neither as servants, nor boarders, but daughters… as we all form one family and take a share [in the work].”

However, fast forward to 1900, and open the November issue of The Mount Holyoke. A leading anonymous editorial reads, “We grumble about [domestic work] now a good deal at times and call it a bore, but… if it really came to a vote, not many of us would wish to abolish it entirely. Most of us have been disgusted more than once by the comment of a stranger implying that much of our time here was spent in scrubbing floors and peeling potatoes.”

These two documents illustrate a great deal about the reputation of Mount Holyoke, and the changes the new century, new organization of the college, and a new president brought to Mount Holyoke. Through this presentation, I aim to expose how the expectation of domestic work began as an integral part of education at Mount Holyoke, and how it evolved in the new century.

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