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The Duck Supper: Roasting Gender in Early Twentieth-Century Bowling Green

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In spring 1901, a sensational episode shattered the genteel peace of a small women’s college in Bowling Green, Kentucky. After clumsily interrupting an act of youthful delinquency on campus, the school’s president tried to keep details of the incident and its chaotic aftermath from becoming public knowledge. He did not succeed. Newspapers in several states picked up the story, embarrassing him and other highly placed citizens and drawing mockery from the local population. Public debate of the matter, brief but rancorous, betrayed the social tensions of a small town in the face of weakening Victorian models of gender, privilege, privacy and individual character.

For twelve years The Pleasant J. Potter College, commonly known as Potter College for Young Ladies, had been a prized beacon on the landscape of Bowling Green and Warren County, Kentucky. Locally funded with scores of twenty-five-dollar subscriptions and a generous five-thousand-dollar pledge from the banker after whom it was named, the school offered a liberal education alongside popular “ornamental” subjects—instrumental and vocal music, art, elocution, French and German—to some 150 women a year. Boarders, usually from the Deep South or elsewhere in Kentucky, resided with their unmarried teachers in a three-story, Italianate structure on the crest of a hill overlooking Bowling Green. Designed in the seminary style, the building housed classrooms, music, parlor and reception rooms, a library, gymnasium, kitchen and dining room. Two dormitory wings extending back from the frontage revealed its institutional purpose, but the rear facade exaggeratedly denied it. Overlooking the back court was a three-tiered spindlework porch, a domestic symbol that many nineteenth-century supporters of women’s colleges, nervous about higher education’s effects on the ambition and morals of females, had found irresistible.¹

Earnestly solicitous of economically and socially privileged students and their families, Potter College promised the refinement, care and safety of an upper-class home. At its head, directing a corps of women teachers, attending to all business affairs and dispensing, as the catalogue promised, “the same kind and fatherly admonition towards his students that they would receive at home,” was the college’s president, Reverend Benjamin Francis Cabell. A Taylor County, Kentucky native who had studied at Ohio Wesleyan University before his

¹ Helen Lefkowitz Horwitz, *Alma Mater: Design and Experience in the Women’s Colleges from Their Nineteenth-Century Beginnings to the 1930s* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993) chronicles the relationship between the built environment of women’s colleges and higher education’s perceived threat to femininity. Her review of developments at the Seven Sister colleges also make clear that the “seminary style” of building, which placed home and classroom under one roof, was out of date in the North more than a decade before Potter College was built: 6-7, 91, 94, 231. The Potter College building was demolished in 1937 to make way for Henry Hardin Cherry Hall on the campus of Western Kentucky University (WKU). Most of Potter College’s records have disappeared, but WKU’s Special Collections Library holds a small collection of its catalogues, yearbooks the *Golden Rod* and *The Talisman*, a student literary magazine *The Green and the Gold*, and miscellany.
ordination in the Methodist Episcopal Church South, Cabell had taught briefly in Bowling Green while a young man. He had then spent more than a decade as the president of another female school, Cedar Bluff College in Woodburn, ten miles south of town. Founded by a Simpson County farmer who had sought to educate his two daughters in a setting “which should possess all the advantages of retirement found in a convent,” Cedar Bluff eventually enrolled some fifty to eighty girls. Unlike Potter College, however, it admitted only boarders, and one lonely student observed that it was “certainly one of the most secluded spots on earth.”

By 1888, thirty-eight-year-old Benjamin Cabell had accepted the invitation of a committee of citizens to direct the establishment of a new school in Bowling Green. Although Potter College secured a state charter of incorporation under a board consisting of himself and nine other trustees, over the years Cabell acted virtually as a sole proprietor, leasing the campus in his own name, recruiting students and retaining all tuition. In return, he paid all expenses and fulfilled his charge to maintain a school for the “education, moral, mental and physical training of females” in such manner as would “comport with the general character of the best institutions of the kind in the South.”

While Potter College advertised the comforts of home, its culture more closely resembled that of an asylum, where the imposition of routine was thought to maintain both physical and mental order. Daily classroom, music and laboratory hours, each punctuated by an electric bell, were only part of a schedule that intruded upon, organized and regulated the girls’ lives. Boarders were particularly hemmed in, beginning in the morning when they awoke to compulsory chapel exercises. Study hall followed a mandatory afternoon walk and the evening meal. On Sunday, confinement in the infirmary was the only alternative to church. Leaving campus without a chaperon was prohibited, as was loud talking or boisterous conduct. Shopping trips and other leisure activities, such as excursions to plays and concerts or to nearby Mammoth Cave, were carefully orchestrated. “Room bell” signaled the time to retire and “light bell” commanded students to turn down the gas jets half an hour later. Girls who had been accustomed not only to less rigorous schooling but to permissive childhoods spent in the rural South quickly found words to describe their new circumstances. “I’d had the great outdoors in which to grow,” recalled one, “and the confinement of boarding school was more or less a prison to me.” Writing for the 1898 yearbook, another student declared herself a “Potter Prisoner.”

Despite the jangle of the school bells, Benjamin Cabell endeavored to preserve Potter College as an island of tranquility. He enclosed its original four-acre campus with a stone fence and acquired an adjoining one-and-a-half-acre tract, the site of a ruined Confederate fortification, to provide more recreational space for students. The young ladies, however, were more difficult to isolate than those Cabell had supervised at remote Cedar Bluff College. Although the campus was situated more than a hundred feet above the indelicate social and

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2 Potter College Catalogue, 1894-95, 25; Cedar Bluff College Catalogue, 1880-81, 17; Minnie McElroy to Clarence McElroy, 24 November 1877, Clarence Underwood McElroy Collection, WKU Special Collections Library.

3 Kentucky Acts, 1889-90, ch. 1471; Lease, Pleasant J. Potter College to B. F. Cabell, 14 December 1889, Warren County (Ky.) Deed Book 70, pp. 40-42.

commercial pursuits of Bowling Green, the public square lay only a half-mile down the hill. Of greater concern was the presence nearby of Ogden College, a school for young men. Populated with the brothers, social peers and prospective spouses of Potter students, Ogden could be conveniently monitored, as one young lady admitted, “out of the south windows with a field glass in hand.”

The boys of Ogden College, too, observed from afar, gawking at their favorites on Sundays after church and sending anonymously penned poems to the girls “who dwell so far above us on the hill” where the “teachers’ eyes are keesest” and “the chaperons act meanest.” Their most exaggerated tributes to the young ladies came in the form of “serenades.” Groups of boys would enter the Potter College campus around midnight and begin caroling well-known standards such as “I’m Tired,” “On the Banks of the Wabash” or “Swanee River.” If they had chosen a time when no teacher was awake and attending to late-night chores, they might reach their finale, “Home Sweet Home,” before being run off the premises. Common at Southern women’s colleges, particularly those located near male institutions, such musical escapades were highly anticipated interruptions in the routine of boarding-school life. No less a source of delight for Potter students was the extreme irritation the “welcome invaders” caused the faculty and president. Reverend Cabell, indeed, could be significantly lacking in humor. After one successful serenade he encountered an Ogden College student in town and somehow trapped him into admitting that he had participated in the event. The confession resulted in the arrests of several perpetrators and the young man, too embarrassed to ask his father for help, turned to washing bottles in a local factory to earn money for the fine.

Upon hearing rumors that his students had begun to slip out of the college building unchaperoned, Cabell took strict measures to discourage the young ladies’ further contacts with the outside world. About 1900, he installed sets of latticed gates at the head of each stairway leading from the second-floor dormitory rooms to the first floor. At night the gates would be locked and teachers in nearby rooms given custody of the keys until morning. Though not built to withstand a determined escape in the event of fire, the barriers sent a stern message to students who were leaving the building unsupervised, not only to meet admirers but for more innocent pursuits such as frolicking outside in winter, coasting down the hill and scooping up “snow cream.”

Successful containment, however, lasted only until late March 1901. As if to foretell the coming drama, two unusual events elsewhere in the state had recently made news. On the afternoon of March 29th one James Dudley Ware had threatened Reverend Walker K. Piner, the handsome father of Potter College freshman Rena Piner, at the railroad depot in nearby Hopkinsville. Less than a year before, a jealous Ware had shot at Piner as he made a pastoral call on Ware’s wife, wounding him in the forehead, but a grand jury had declined to indict him. Although his wife dropped her subsequent divorce suit, Ware continued to harbor ill will.

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5 Talisman (Potter College, 1908), 79. Ogden College had opened in 1877. A privately endowed institution, it initially offered free tuition to young men from Warren County: see Jesse B. Johnson and Lowell H. Harrison, “Ogden College: A Brief History,” Register of the Kentucky Historical Society 68: 3 (July 1970), 189-220.

6 Talisman (1908), 68; Christie Anne Farnham, The Education of the Southern Belle: Higher Education and Student Socialization in the Antebellum South (New York: New York University Press, 1994), 171; Golden Rod, 58; The Green and the Gold (Potter College), June 1903, 36; June 1907, 22-23, March 1909, 28; Letter to “Billie” [Mattie Backus Duncan to William Backus], 2 June 1975, Typescript, Bowling Green History Vertical File, WKU Special Collections Library. The unfortunate serenader was Mattie’s future husband, Robert W. Duncan, a classmate of Benjamin Cabell’s son Charles at Ogden College.

7 Talisman (1908), 93; Green and Gold, April 1903, 23; Golden Rod, 55.
Brandishing a pistol, he exchanged words with Piner at the depot, but bystanders managed to subdue him before any damage was done. Still greater misfortune had visited the families of students Florence Cottrell and Ruth Haynes. Two weeks earlier, George Short and Eugene Haynes, their uncle and father respectively, had lost their merchant drug business when fire destroyed a large section of Cloverport, Kentucky.  

The month ended, however, with an episode at Potter College that far overshadowed the others. Bowling Green’s winter had been mild, but spring was slow in coming. Temperatures were still cool, about forty-six degrees and falling, and the moon was nearly full when boarders retired to their rooms at nine-thirty in the evening on Saturday, March 30 and the matron, Annie Leverett, locked the second-floor gates. As midnight approached, two hired hacks set out from town toward the college. The stylish, horse-drawn buggies had their tops raised, but only in part to shield the occupants from the coolness of the evening. Inside were five young men, members of three prominent Bowling Green families. Twenty-four-year-old Harry Nahm and his twenty-six-year-old brother Floyd were sons of Moses Nahm, a wealthy dealer in dry goods whose brother Emanuel had served on Potter College’s founding board of trustees. Both Floyd and Harry were former students of Ogden College. Their companion, Roland Fitch, was nineteen. He had grown up in Louisville, then moved to Bowling Green after several years abroad to join his older brother at the family-owned Bowling Green Gas-Light Company. Two more brothers completed the party. George Willis Potter and Pleasant J. Potter, Jr. were, respectively, twenty and seventeen. Willis had left Ogden College in 1899 after three years and Pleasant, Jr. was completing his fourth year in its preparatory department. Their sister, Mary, was a Potter College graduate. Their father, James Erasmus, was the long-time treasurer of Potter College’s board of trustees. Their grandfather, Pleasant J. Potter, at whose bank Willis was employed, had retired in 1898 with the school he helped to build unsullied by controversy. 

When the hacks reached the entrance to the campus, the young men alighted and began to climb the hill. They carried an extension ladder on their shoulders and, more ominously, pistols in their belts. Waiting for them in a second-floor room in the rear wing on the building’s west side were five of Potter’s young ladies. Lena Hopkins was from Louisiana and had been a student for two years. Seventeen-year-old Bessie Boyer of Harrisburg, Illinois was completing her first year of study. Twenty-year-old Bessie Simpson had arrived at the college two years earlier from Nicholasville, Kentucky, where she lived with her mother and stepfather. Though born in Florida, where her father operated an orange grove, eighteen-year-old Florence Cottrell lived with her aunt and uncle in Cloverport. The last member of the group, seventeen-year-old Ruth Haynes, had accompanied Florence to Potter College from Cloverport in the winter of 1900. 

The girls had stealthily arranged the midnight rendezvous that afternoon during a shopping trip in town. The boys later claimed that their plan was merely to escort the girls to a local restaurant for a late-night “duck supper.” The girls’ explanation would suggest that they viewed the gravity of the offence in proportion to the distance traveled: the boys were merely to

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8 Louisville Times, 2 July, 1 October 1900; (Louisville, Ky.) Courier-Journal, 15, 30 March 1901.
9 Meteorological Record of John E. Younglove, Calvert-Obenchain-Younglove Collection, WKU Special Collections Library; Ogden College Catalogues, 1889-96; (Bowling Green, Ky.) Park City Daily News, 12 November 1948. Much of what follows is drawn from a lengthy account in the Courier-Journal, 6 April 1901. Other newspapers are cited where they provide additional details. With one exception, Bowling Green newspapers for this time have not survived.
10 Potter College Catalogue, 1900-01; “Society in Kentucky,” Courier-Journal, 9 September 1899, 6, 13 January 1900. Newspapers mistakenly listed Bessie Boyer as being from Indiana.
deliver lunch, to be eaten in the buggies stationed at the foot of the hill. In any event, the chance to supplement their school’s dreary institutional menu was perhaps the deciding factor in the young ladies’ decision to extend the pleasure of their downtown encounter into “a little frolic.”

When they reached the building, two of the boys dropped their overcoats and raised the ladder up to the girls’ window, while the others established a lookout from the old Confederate fortification at the rear of the property. Unfortunately, observing since ten o’clock from the first-floor library directly underneath the girls’ rooms were Alice Glascock, the college’s principal, and Lillian Michie, Benjamin Cabell’s secretary. The teacher chaperoning the shopping trip had grown suspicious and made a report to Mrs. Glascock. She in turn had warned Cabell, who was skeptical but gave the women permission to keep their watch.

The college would subsequently deny that the young ladies had been under surveillance, insisting that only customary supervision was in effect that evening. The difference may have been slight, given assurances in the newspapers that the school was “one of the strictest institutions of its kind in the country and the students are carefully watched night and day.” Whether or not their presence had been expected, the appearance of the “five dark forms” prompted Mrs. Glascock to rouse the president from his living quarters. Cabell dressed, took up his double-barreled shotgun loaded with birdshot, left the building through the rear court and hurried around the west side. He arrived to find that Bessie Simpson, Lena Hopkins and Florence Cottrell had already descended the ladder into the arms of their escorts. Cabell sternly commanded the boys to leave.

Although accounts necessarily differed, the events that followed were extreme, foolhardy, and a little comical. No one could say who shot first, how often, or why: Cabell to frighten the boys, one of the boys to warn Cabell away, or to warn his cohorts that they had been discovered. Whoever heard the first gun discharge promptly returned fire. One account scored the shots at six to three in favor of the boys, while another reported that “the college grounds rang with the roar” of twenty-five shots. In the confusion of battle, all five boys and three of the girls scattered down the hill to the waiting hacks. The remaining two girls, who seem to have been descending the ladder when Cabell arrived, hastily changed course and retreated to their rooms.

Cabell, unhurt, summoned the police. Before help arrived, however, the telephone rang. It was Roland Fitch asking permission, no doubt rather sheepishly, to return the three escapees to the college. Fitch arrived a few minutes later with Willis Potter, Harry Nahm and the “tearful and penitent girls.” By this time two police officers were in attendance, but Cabell neither pressed a complaint nor offered forgiveness; instead, he sent everyone home and the girls upstairs to bed.

How could such a reckless exchange have occurred? When Cabell dressed and hurried to confront the boys, he could not have believed that an assault or forcible kidnapping was in

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11 Potter College students ably demonstrated the boarding-school girl’s traditional preoccupation with food, ordering boxes of provisions from their families, savoring dinners at the homes of local girls, holding chafing-dish parties, and using their own stores to enjoy clandestine “midnight feasts” in their rooms or in the college gymnasium: Farnham, Education of the Southern Belle, 125; Golden Rod, 54-55; Green and Gold, March 1907, 17; Talisman (1907), 84; Talisman (1908), 79.
12 St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 7 April 1901; Hopkinsville Kentuckian, 9 April 1901.
13 Courier-Journal, 6 April 1901; Cincinnati Enquirer, 5 April 1901. The St. Louis Post-Dispatch had a fourth girl descending the ladder, while the Evansville Courier, 5 April 1901, reported the boys assisting the fifth when the shooting began.
progress; yet, in taking up a shotgun, he also did not expect that his mere presidential presence would be sufficient to deter the trespassers. Possibly the periodic midnight “serenades” and recent rumors of unauthorized departures from the campus had exasperated him beyond endurance. More likely, he simply knew from experience that his adversaries would be both armed and emboldened. Young men carrying pistols and knives had been the bane of school and public authorities for decades. Legislation prohibiting concealed weapons had been largely ineffective in the face of both weak law enforcement and the Southern man’s code of honor, which obliged him to maintain a constant state of readiness against those armed only for “cowardly” reasons. The boys later explained that their weapons were for protection when passing through a “negro settlement” on the way to the college; nevertheless, they were risking a backlash. Well-off white males who abused the law attracted particular resentment due to their capacity to bear fines of several hundred dollars or to avoid punishment altogether.

Cabell, too, had risked public anger. In his attempt to preserve Potter College’s reputation as a safe environment for young ladies, he had helped expose five of them to remarkable danger.¹⁴

Unluckily, the timing of the incident coincided with the opening of the Warren County Circuit Court’s April session. The court was not unfamiliar with firearms offenses. Since January, its order book had recorded more than twenty “CDW”–concealed deadly weapons–matters and some ten cases of malicious shooting. A grand jury was empanelled on April 1 and proceeded to hear evidence against the boys from Alice Glascock, Lillian Michie, hack drivers Jim Dearing and George McAlister, policemen Mike McAuliffe and George Franklin, and a reluctant Benjamin Cabell. Potter music teachers Ada Ayer and Marian Rouse, one of whom had perhaps been the girls’ suspicious chaperon, also testified. When the grand jury returned indictments on Thursday, April 4, the news leaked and created a sensation. The Associated Press picked up the story and it became front-page news across the region.¹⁵

Benjamin Cabell was fond of newspapers, subscribing to over a dozen political and as many religious papers. Though he worried about the tendency of the press to “pander to the low tastes of the public” and to engage in caricature, he always looked forward to his daily copy. For once, however, he must have dreaded the arrival of his many subscriptions. “SWAINS,” cried the Cincinnati Enquirer, “Stood Under College Window” and replied “With a Shot” to the president’s orders to leave. “Five Young Men Stole Schoolgirls,” blared the St. Louis Post-Dispatch. “Elopers Foiled,” announced the Evansville Journal. Accounts varied slightly in detail, some, like the Enquirer, reporting that the boys had shot first, others claiming that upon making his discovery Cabell had immediately opened fire upon the intruders. The failure of two boys to return to the college after the incident prompted rumors that they had been

¹⁴Courier-Journal, 6 April 1901; Farnham, Education of the Southern Belle, 138; Robert M. Ireland, “The Problem of Concealed Weapons in Nineteenth-Century Kentucky,” Register of the Kentucky Historical Society 91: 4 (Autumn 1993), 370-85. An instance of gunplay, in which one servant had shot and killed another, occurred during Cabell’s presidency at Cedar Bluff College: Bowling Green Gazette, 30 April 1884. Only seven months after the incident at Potter College, the young men of Indiana’s “staid old Hanover College” ensured general chaos during a girls’ “night robe parade” by bringing their “shotguns and revolvers into noisy play”: Courier-Journal, 23 October 1901.

¹⁵Warren County Circuit Court, Criminal Order Book, 1901; Warren County Circuit Court Indictments, No. 7024, 7029, 4 April 1901.
“winged”—one in the backside as he was leaping a fence, according to the Louisville Courier-Journal. The papers acknowledged that the rendezvous had been prearranged but a few, describing the approach of the young men in “closed carriages” to “remove” their female acquaintances, hinted at a darker deception of the girls. The Evansville Courier, the Knoxville Journal and Tribune and the Woodford Sun of Versailles, Kentucky simply contemplated an interrupted elopement. Despite its headline that the girls had been “stolen,” the Post-Dispatch noted that the boys were known to the five girls and had previously been permitted to call on them at the college. 16

In reacting to the antics of the “Bowling Green Society Swells” and their “Kentucky Belles,” journalists did not dwell upon the morality of the young people’s adventure. The Courier-Journal of April 5 used the eye-catching term “scandal” in its headline, but in a lengthy account published the next day, like the Louisville Evening Post and the Glasgow Times, downgraded the incident to a “sensation.” Other reports referred to a “fracas” or an “escapade,” as if its titillating details, though newsworthy, merited only brief attention. Both the Courier-Journal and Post-Dispatch, however, hastened to point out that deliberate efforts to suppress the incident had accounted for the lateness of their reports. The shootings “only came to light last night,” explained the Nashville Banner on April 5. The Woodford Sun noted “the utmost endeavors of many people of influence to have the details kept secret.” The “persistent efforts of rich parents and influential friends” had been expended to prevent the grand jury from returning indictments, intoned the Courier-Journal. No newspaper neglected to mention that all the young people involved were members of prominent families. Therein, of course, lay the seeds of real scandal. 17

Suppression of the story appeared even more sinister when, predictably, the feared backlash came to pass. The grand jury’s criminal indictments, read out in court on April 5, took the worst possible view of the facts and lacked all sympathy for the accused. Printed in full in the Courier-Journal, they charged the five boys first with “unlawfully committing a riot” in their conspiracy to “induce, entice and decoy” the girls, “then being inmates of Potter College,” away from the school’s custody in violation of its rules and discipline. Secondly, the boys stood accused of “wilfully, maliciously and feloniously shooting at one B. F. Cabell with deadly weapons . . . with the intent to then and thereby kill said Cabell but without wounding

16 XV Club Minutes, 4 March 1897, 17 December 1903, WKU Special Collections Library; Cincinnati Enquirer, 5 April 1901; St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 7 April 1901; Evansville Journal, 5 April 1901; Courier-Journal, 6 April 1901; Evansville Courier, 5 April 1901; (Knoxville, Tenn.) Journal and Tribune, 5 April 1901; (Versailles, Ky.) Woodford Sun, 11 April 1901.

17 Louisville Evening Post, 6 April 1901; Glasgow (Ky.) Times, 9 April 1901; Evansville Journal, 6 April 1901; Hopkinsville Kentuckian, 9 April 1901; Courier-Journal, 5 April 1901; St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 7 April 1901; Nashville Banner, 5 April 1901; Woodford Sun, 11 April 1901.
him thereby.” While the Courier-Journal decorously published only the boys’ names, most newspapers also disclosed the identities of the girls.18

Heeding the grand jury’s general plea for stricter observance and enforcement of the law, the Warren County sheriff immediately served arrest warrants on the Potter and Nahm brothers. Each posted bond of one hundred dollars on the first indictment and two hundred dollars on the second, undertaking to appear for trial at the September term of court. Potter College’s treasurer signed as surety for all four. On April 8, Roland Fitch was served and posted bond, his brother Henry acting as surety. The day after the incident, Fitch wisely had left town for Owensboro. He had then ventured to Cloverport, reportedly at the invitation of either Florence Cottrell’s or Ruth Haynes’s families, from whom he and his companions had sought and obtained forgiveness.19

Benjamin Cabell, too, had been out of town. On April 6, he arrived in Frankfort to make a personal appeal to the governor to pardon the five indicted boys. Only thirty-one years old, John Crepps Wickliffe Beckham had been elected little more than a year earlier to succeed the assassinated William Goebel. As Goebel’s running mate in the 1899 election, Beckham had endured the attendant turmoil when Goebel successfully contested his apparent defeat. Now the so-called “Boy Governor,” wary of controversy, faced the fifty-year-old president of “one of the leading and most fashionable female colleges in the South” who insisted that the boys’ gunshots were wide of their mark, intended only to frighten and not to kill. Beckham, however, declined to interfere in the matter.20

During his interview with the governor, Cabell also expressed fear that the five young ladies, “who had been guilty of no more than indiscretions, for which he thought others probably more to blame than they,” would be compelled to testify at the trial of the young men and thus attract further adverse publicity. If he in fact believed that the girls had done nothing seriously to endanger their reputations, Cabell had already decided that they posed a danger to his. Their actions that night had proven them to be instigators rather than victims, much greater threats to order than the fictional legal creations the grand jury imagined being “induced, enticed and decoyed” down a ladder. The president had already dealt with them summarily, no doubt thankful that none was from Bowling Green. The morning after the incident, he had convened a meeting of the faculty, called the girls before it and expelled all five. On the same day that Cabell made his appeal for leniency for the boys, Mary Haynes and Carrie Short arrived in Bowling Green to collect their daughter and niece and take them home to what was left of fire-struck Cloverport.21

Over the next few weeks, talk of the “duck supper” consumed Bowling Green. “Nothing has created a bigger stir here in ten years,” confirmed a report to the Nashville Banner. Upon reflection two weeks after the incident, the Bowling Green News found no lack of poor judgment in all the participants. Benjamin Cabell earned censure for his extreme reaction; although the boys’ recklessness had justified his return of fire, having been forewarned of the prank he “should have put a stop to it in some other way.” Public opinion, however, reserved special condemnation for the favoritism shown the young men and commended Governor Beckham’s refusal to interfere. The News reprinted a much-talked-about

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18 Warren County Circuit Court Indictments, No. 7024, 7029; Courier-Journal, 6 April 1901.
19 Bowling Green News, 12 April 1901; Warren County Circuit Court Indictments, No. 7024, 7029; St. Louis Post-Dispatch, 7 April 1901; Evansville Courier, 8 April 1901.
20 Courier-Journal, 7 April 1901.
21 Courier-Journal, 6 April 1901; Evansville Courier, 8 April 1901.
Louisville Times article in which its “Tattler” columnist was contemptuous both of the machinations of high society and the hypocrisy of relations between the sexes. Miss Elvira Sydnor Miller excoriated friends of the boys who had been “wearing holes in the knees of their trousers interceding for the chappies” and “yanking the Governor’s coat-tails to get a pardon.” And what of the girls? “We are forever hearing a lot of rot about protecting women,” she cried, “but don’t you listen to this fairy tale, sister.” The less-culpable girls had been “packed off with great big freckles on their character” while she imagined “several fatted ducks” roasted in celebration of expected reprieves for the boys. Even those eager to blame the girls struggled for a logical argument. Elsewhere in the News a “poor, helpless man” was reminded of the “first sin” committed by a “bad and designing woman, Mother Eve” and of “embicilic [sic] Adam,” too weak to resist her and too cowardly to defend her. Relieved not to be “one of those much despised and forsaken women,” he nevertheless found himself admitting that the principal cause of their wretchedness was the blame they shouldered for the sins of men.22

As if to underscore the inevitability of the outcome for all involved, the News fell to satirizing the events it had been prevented from reporting firsthand. Ridiculing both the boys and their excuse for arming themselves, a front-page cartoon depicted them posturing beneath a ladder in tie, tails and blackface as a portly gentleman waved his arms in alarm. An accompanying poem began, “This is the college in Bowling Green, / Where Lena and Bessie and Florence were seen.” The young men were “dude’s [sic] and the fact remains. / They had more money than they had brains.” Another ditty, reprinted from the Louisville Times, likened a woman to a bottle: “In every case she gets it in the neck.” Poking fun at both the “duck supper” and the latest chapter of the “Ware-Piner affair,” a correspondent claimed to have overheard an unrepentant college girl whisper in church that Benjamin Cabell reminded her of Reverend Piner, recently accosted by his parishioner’s jealous husband. Asked why, she replied “Well, . . . they don’t ‘W-a-r-e’ well as divines, do they?”

The final disposition of the “duck supper” case undoubtedly relieved the boys’ supporters and, despite Governor Beckham’s denial of a pardon, gave little satisfaction to their critics. Whether the result of influence, careful reconsideration or fevered negotiations through the summer, on September 9 the boys’ lawyer and Commonwealth Attorney Nat Porter waived a jury and submitted the case directly to Judge Warner E. Settle. Settle was an original trustee of Potter College and, despite assuming his judgeship in 1892, was still listed in its catalogues as secretary and a member of the board. Unmindful of any conflict of interest, Settle acquitted Pleasant Potter, Jr. (who had not been expelled from Ogden College) on the charge of unlawfully committing a riot. The others he fined one hundred dollars each, the maximum allowable, but did not exercise the option to jail them for up to fifty days. On the charge of shooting with intent to kill, which carried a prison sentence of up to five years, the Court granted the Commonwealth’s motion to dismiss for lack of proof. As Porter rather ungrammatically endorsed the indictment, “it appears that the shooting alleged herein, now appears from the evidence to have been done under circumstances, that render it so difficult to identify the particular one of the defendant[s] that did the shooting, or to make the reasonable certainty of identification well nigh impossible.” The same acts, he noted, had resulted in fines for riot, “which punishment in view of the other facts alluded to seems adequate.”24

22 Nashville Banner, 5 April 1901; Woodford Sun, 8 April 1901; Bowling Green News, 12 April 1901.
23 Bowling Green News, 12 April 1901.
24 Warren County Circuit Court, Criminal Order Book, September 1901, 377-78; Warren County Circuit Court Indictments, No. 7024, 7029 (emphasis in original). In a deposition given in connection with the liquidation of
The four convicted boys paid their fines and court costs within a few days. For each (or more likely, for their families) it was a respectable outlay, almost equal to one term of base tuition and room and board at Potter College. No record survives of how the Bowling Green press viewed this outcome, but it seemed to escape the notice of the Louisville Courier-Journal, which the previous spring had devoted three sizable articles to the incident. Reporting briefly on the adjournment of the Warren Circuit Court’s September term, the paper omitted any mention of the “duck supper” case. By now, its editors would have been preoccupied with another story of gunfire filling the front page that week in September: the shooting and imminent death of President William A. McKinley.25

Their “little frolic” over, the five boys returned to young adult society. Seven months after paying his fine, Floyd Nahm stood in the wedding party of a Bowling Green girl and her Louisville groom. Willis Potter married in 1903 and Pleasant, Jr. in 1917. Although the Potter brothers spent their later lives in Chattanooga, Roland Fitch and the Nahm brothers remained in Bowling Green. Fitch married in 1906, having begun his long executive career with a position at the street railway company. Harry Nahm died in 1910 of tuberculosis.26

Benjamin Cabell, meanwhile, relinquished his responsibility as chief enforcer of Potter College’s security and hired an armed guard to keep watch over the campus at night. As continuing serenades would prove, however, this tactic exercised no greater powers of deterrence than birdshot. Two years later, a young man even lured a gullible friend to the college with a love letter from a fictitious belle, then enlisted the guard to fire his weapon into the air as part of the practical joke.27

And what, again, of the girls? Did Ruth, Florence, Lena and the two Bessies return home forever disgraced? On the contrary, no “great big freckles” seem to have soiled their characters. For the three girls who resided in Kentucky, at least, life continued much as before. Only a few months after the “duck supper,” news of their rounds of visiting and attendance at social functions reappeared in the Courier-Journal’s Saturday society page. Two weeks after the boys were fined, Ruth Haynes left Cloverport for a year’s study at Oxford Female College in Ohio. The summer after being banished from Potter College, Bessie Simpson spent a month in Cartersville, Georgia with former classmate Laura Jones, a pastor’s daughter. Back home in Nicholasville, she regularly entertained her euchre club. Florence Cottrell departed with her aunt in November to spend the winter in Pueblo, Colorado, but was honored with a party upon her return to Cloverport in the spring. On her way home from Ohio that summer, Ruth Haynes stopped in Nicholasville to visit Bessie Simpson. A few weeks afterward, Miss Simpson played hostess to Bessie Boyer, otherwise matter-of-factly reported to be out of school and at home with her mother. Florence Cottrell may have returned to her home in Florida sometime later; Ruth Haynes traveled there in the winter of 1904 with Florence’s aunt, perhaps to visit her. Ruth and Bessie Simpson spent several weeks together in the summer of 1905 as each other’s guests, then on excursions to visit friends in Louisville and Rockport, Indiana. The following

Potter College nine years later, another original trustee stated that Settle had resigned from the board in 1892:
Deposition of James D. Hines, 11 May 1910, In the Matter of Pleasant J. Potter College v. B. F. Cabell, No. 6842 (indexed as No. 11427), Cir. Ct. (Warren Co., Ky., June 18, 1910). Settle, however, appeared to maintain a connection with the college, as stock certificates filed in the case dated as late as 1904 bear his signature as secretary.
25 Warren County Circuit Court, Criminal Order Book, September 1901, 401; Courier-Journal, 13 September 1901.
27 Green and Gold, June 1903, 36.
summer, as Roland Fitch was taking his wedding vows, Ruth was again preparing to travel to Louisville for Homecoming, an elaborate civic festival for Kentuckians living outside the state. On June 15, a lengthy parade of flower-bedecked floats carried a homecoming queen from each county through the streets of the city. Among the Breckinridge County queen’s “maids of honor” following behind, this time in an open carriage, was Ruth Haynes. Two years later, on June 30, 1908, after being fêted for three days by the Cloverport social set, Ruth married. Bessie Simpson also married, then divorced, and eight days before the end of the First World War fell victim to the influenza epidemic. The local paper, however, found no stains upon her character, eulogizing the Red Cross volunteer as “a woman of the kindest impulses, generous to a fault and sympathetic and charitable.”

The uproar over the girls’ expulsions, along with their continued visibility in the social circles of their home towns, demonstrated that the “duck supper” incident was far removed from the stuff of Victorian melodrama in which men were notorious and women utterly ruined. Its brief time in the spotlight also indicated that the broader transformation in late-nineteenth-century attitudes toward personal conduct had permeated even the small towns of Kentucky. As cultural historians have discerned, the Victorian investment in “character”—that noble, fixed sense of duty, integrity and restraint—was yielding fewer dividends in a rapidly changing, more materialistic and consumer-oriented society, one that increasingly identified virtue with the expression, not the suppression, of individual desires. To prosper in such an atmosphere demanded not an immutable character but a more malleable blend of tolerance, charm and attractiveness that showcased the self and kept one “in circulation,” always open to the next financial, social or marital opportunity. Increasingly fascinated by this modern parade of personalities, the public was less likely to be scandalized over the transgressions of any particular individual than over attempts to suppress the flow of information on which its appetite for general human folly subsisted. Defying the attempt at secrecy, newspapers generously served up the details of the “duck supper” as a gossipy feast, launched some now-familiar volleys about the arrogance of privilege, the recklessness of men and the oppression of women and then, like the young people caught in the crossfire, moved on.

Back at Potter College, students would remain officially circumspect about the incident. Their quarterly magazine, begun in 1902, and their yearbooks mischievously recounted other adventures in rule-breaking; the magazine also reported the whereabouts and activities of many alumnae, but neither ever mentioned the five young ladies so talked-of in the spring of 1901. The locked gates that had inspired their unusual egress received brief mention in a mock tour of the campus written for the 1908 yearbook. “This is to separate Beauty from the Beasts,” explained the guide, wryly affirming the belief that, notwithstanding her idealized purity, a young lady and not her aggressive suitors held the keys to social and sexual disorder. The “celebrated lattice door” surfaced again a year later, when Potter College closed and the “last

28 “Society in Kentucky,” Courier-Journal, 21 September, 30 November 1901, 15 March, 21 June, 12 July 1902, 13 February 1904, 24 June, 8 July, 19, 26 August 1905, 9 June 1906; Jessamine (Co., Ky.) Journal, 6 September 1901, 8 March 1907, 8 November 1918; The Owl (Harrisburg High School, 1902), quoted in The Shawnee (Saline County, Illinois Genealogical Society), Spring 1998, 19; Breckenridge News, 1 July 1908. Between the summers of 1901 and 1907, Bessie Simpson’s and Ruth Haynes’s names appeared some twenty and forty times, respectively, in the Courier-Journal’s society page.

will” of its senior class affectionately bequeathed the key to housekeeper Lillian Buchanan. Perhaps this final group of graduates understood that the “duck supper” scandal simply reflected the wider world to which they were now paroled—freer, more exciting, but still wanting in logic and justice, especially for women—a world in which everything, and nothing, was changing. Appropriately enough, in the final issue of the student magazine a young lady’s musings on the persistence of gender conventions carried special meaning for all of the “duck supper” guests. “Nothing could induce a man to steal or commit murder because custom has said that these things are not to be countenanced,” she observed, “but the same custom has established one set of morals for men and another for women.”

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30 *Talisman* (1908), 93; *Park City Daily News*, 21 May 1909; *Green and Gold*, May 1909, 11.