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‘Where Out-of-Town Girls Could Come Feel Safe in New York’

By BOB MORRIS DEC. 13, 2017



*Abbie Hoffman, second from right, and Grace Slick
outside the White House in 1970.*

Associated Press

At a recent event for the very active alumnae of Finch College, the genteel Upper East Side women’s school that dramatically closed its doors in 1975, wine flowed along with conversation inside the music room of the Birch Wathen Lenox School on East 77th Street.

There was talk of classmates Tricia Nixon Cox, Isabella Rossellini, Anne Cox Chambers, Francine LeFrak, Suzanne Pleshette, Jane Holzer and Lilly Pulitzer Rousseau. After a polite seminar about real estate in Manhattan, the women also discussed Grace Slick, who attended the school, and her news-making White House incident when Richard Nixon was president.

“We were waiting outside in line in our suits and white gloves to go into tea in honor of the 70th anniversary of Finch,” said Ceil Ainsworth, class of 1958. She remembered seeing Grace Slick in a skirt and boots “with a man who turned out to be Abbie Hoffman trying to get inside.”

Ms. Slick, a singer in the band Jefferson Airplane, was from a Republican Bay Area family. She had attended Finch in 1957, years before she became an anti-establishment pop star famous for “White Rabbit” and “Don’t You Want Somebody to Love?” She brought Mr. Hoffman as her White House date and planned, she later claimed, to dose Richard Nixon’s tea with LSD stowed in her fingernail. Security guards recognized Mr. Hoffman from an F.B.I. watch list and barred them both at the gate.

“Those were interesting times,” Ms. Ainsworth said, as her friends smiled.

They were indeed, and for all kinds of reasons, especially at a faltering small college with talented faculty, an opera box, a gilded mirrored dining hall with a chef who made coquilles St-Jacques, and famously high tuition, all in the posh confines of East 78th Street between Park and Madison Avenues.

These days Finch alumnae, many of whom have or have had serious careers despite the school’s fluffy reputation (one oft-mocked class, Comparative Merchandise, used Bergdorf Goodman for shopping research), stay engaged with as many events as any living college sponsors. Many support a generous scholarship fund for female community college students transferring to four-year schools. One Finch scholar, Eiko Otake, performed a dance and movement piece at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in November.

This fierce Finch bond around a dead institution is not as much about vanishing New York ([Lord & Taylor](#)) as vanished (the Stork Club, whose proprietor’s daughter attended the school). The nostalgia is almost plaintive — like for a Camelot with dorms.

“Finch was a jewel box where out-of-town girls could come feel safe in New York,” said Margaret Hedberg, who runs the International Debutante Ball and who was a “Finchie” in the early ’60s with Tricia Nixon. During Ms. Hedberg’s first year, she made the dean’s list. Her second, she got distracted by a boyfriend with a sports car. “And I started playing bridge in the lounge, where I’d see my French professor going to teach my class through our cigarette smoke,” she said.



*Jane Holzer, pictured here in 1966,
attended Finch College.*

Harry Benson/Express, via Getty Images

Jane Holzer, known in her day as Baby Jane Holzer, a Palm Beach born student who became part of the Warhol gang, got kicked out of Finch. She wasn't surprised. "The last spring term I didn't spend one night there," she told Tom Wolfe when he interviewed her for a New York Herald Tribune Sunday Magazine article published in 1964 entitled "The Girl of the Year." She didn't take her exams either, she told him, preferring her night life studies at El Morocco.

Other Finch students took academics seriously, availing themselves of the school's tiny classes, excellent art-history department and prestigious small museums. They went on to become curators, judges, lawyers, doctors, teachers, journalists and advocates for women in the workplace. Kathleen Guzman, the managing director of Heritage Auctions and an "Antiques Road Show" regular, had a charismatic professor of African Art, Marshall Mount, who changed her life.

"I was studying costume design," said Ms. Guzman, who migrated up from Fort Lauderdale in the early 1970s and was a scholarship student. "But he was so extraordinary and so excited to show us beautiful things that I changed my focus to art history."

Her memories of her time at the school include costume parties at the nearby Carlyle Hotel and students in full makeup for early morning classes with the more attractive male professors.

“It was an interesting time to be in a white-glove school with chandeliers, and they even gave me a maid my first year,” said Debbie Bancroft, a sociable journalist who attended Finch in 1974 as its finances were imploding. “But it sure went downhill fast.”

The reason had to do with a diminishing number of applicants for same-sex schools. It didn’t help that Finch maintained a reputation as a finishing school long after it had gone from a two-year college to four. Its founder, Jessica Finch Cosgrave, was a Barnard graduate, suffragist and socialist-leaning firebrand who started the school in 1900. She aimed to give women a more practical education than other classically centered colleges, so that they might have careers before having children and after raising them. Her faculty included singers, musicians, artists, designers and politicians.

But though Finch enrolled Roosevelts, Whitneys and Vanderbilts, it had no endowment. Overleveraged finances coupled with a nearby water main break causing costly damage forced it to close. (To paraphrase Tolstoy, all faltering women’s colleges falter in their own way, most recently [Sweet Briar College](#) in Virginia, which announced its closing but has managed to stay open. Right now, Mills College in Oakland, Calif., faces financial trauma.)

“When we understood we were closing, we did telethons and marketing campaigns,” said Ms. Guzman, who lives near Finch’s old block. “But we found that so much money of the wealth in families ends up going to the colleges of men, not women, that our outreach wasn’t successful.”

Even selling off its valuable art from the museum, including works by Isamu Noguchi, Josef Albers and Sol LeWitt, along with hitting up parents for money on top of tuition, couldn’t keep the school from closing. Now Finch exists purely as an alumnae association that a former professor, Margaret Maxwell, began in 1993.

“We didn’t have access to student records,” said Frances Fish Tomkins, a self-described hillbilly who came to Finch in 1956 from West Virginia and never forgot making her first friends in a daunting city. “So we looked everyone up in yearbooks and phone books.”

Three hundred people showed up for a reunion in 1994, and by the next fall a thousand were in touch. The Finch College Alumni Association Foundation Trust now gives away

at least 10 scholarships of \$5,000 a year to community college students, many recommended by LaGuardia Community College in Queens and who have attended schools including Yale, Smith and Brown.



The old dorm entrance of Finch College on 61 East 77th Street, now a medical office and apartment building.

An Rong Xu for The New York Times

“I was a scholarship student at Finch myself,” Ms. Guzman said. “So I love giving back.”

After three students of diverse backgrounds receiving Finch scholarships introduced themselves to applause at the Birch Wathen Lenox School, the event broke up. Lois Ziegler, class of 1958 and the former fashion director of JC Penney, led a large contingent to dinner. But two younger women broke off to head west to stand in front of a townhouse on East 77th Street that was once their dorm and is now a medical office and apartment building.

“This was where I put a piano in the elevator, dropped a coconut cake from my window and got into my nightgown to walk around the lobby of the Carlyle on a dare,” said Megan McCarthy, who came to Finch from Atlanta and is now a realtor in Westchester County, N.Y.

“When we turned 18, we took each other to the bar at the Carlyle for our first legal drinks,” said Sarah Macyshyn, her classmate, who came to Finch from Greenwich, Conn.

They looked at a door to a townhouse across the street where sexy John Phillips of the Mamas and the Papas lived, remembering knocking on his door for Halloween treats or to ask if he needed a babysitter. They remembered the gold upholstery of dining hall

banquettes, Texas students in fur coats, New York Philharmonic concerts, movie premieres and one trip downtown to the Continental Baths, where there was an expensive cover charge and men in little pink towels.

“It was my introduction to New York night life,” Ms. Macyshyn said.



*The exterior of the old Finch College
on East 78th Street.*

An Rong Xu for The New York Times

On East 78th Street, around the corner from a Missoni store and across the way from the Mnuchin Gallery, Ms. McCarthy looked up at what once was the 12-story academic building and is now luxury apartments. “I remember a class in women’s history that made me see how women could really make a difference,” she said. “This school changed the way I saw the world.”