FOREWORD

History is one of the most important assets of a college or university; the story of an institution's founding—its origin story—defines its mission; decisions over time reveal strategic intent. Critical events define community. Most institutions preserve at least pieces of their history in traditions and rituals that help build a communal identity. But fewer institutions think analytically about their history, seek to understand where they stand from whence they've traveled.

The Douglass Century: Transformation of the Women's College at Rutgers University seeks to provide such a history for Douglass College. Douglass has a remarkable story. It is the only college in America founded by an organization of women's clubs and by popular subscription. Mabel Douglass, the driving force of this movement, and the college's first dean, was a formidable and complex woman. When the college opened its doors in 1918 as the New Jersey College for Women, with fifty-four students and twelve books in its library, it was a brave but frugal venture. In reading *The Douglass Century*, I thought often of Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* with its contrast between the rich and sumptuous dinner of wine and partridge at an Oxbridge men's college and the beef and potatoes served at the newly founded women's college. Woolf calls this new college Fernham—a stand-in for Newnham and Girton, but it could well be Douglass.

Douglass College's feisty beginning gave it a distinctive legacy; it was founded not by a benefactor, like Matthew Vassar or Sophia Smith, but by a woman's movement—the campaign of the women's clubs—and it was founded as a public resource—together with the agriculture school, the most public part of Rutgers University. *The Douglass Century* traces the distinctive growth of the college and its complex relationship to its parent university, Rutgers, which was not always a kind father. The most tangled piece of this tale is the series of negotiations with Rutgers, over several decades, in which all the separate colleges at Rutgers, including Douglass, became one university, with separate residential campuses. The story of

Douglass offers an interesting variant on the history of women's colleges in the United States. No longer an independent women's college like Smith or Wellesley with its own admissions and faculty, it nonetheless continues to exist as a residential campus with distinctive programs, designed for women students, and its own dean.

One of the many pleasures of *The Douglass Century* involves understanding your years as a student through a different lens. I was surprised by all that I didn't know about what was happening at the college when I was a student there in the mid 60s. We all tend to assume that we understood our experience when we were living it. One of the gifts of history is perspective. It can show us how the communities in which we participated were distinctive, how they inhabited their own context, how they shaped their environment and were shaped by it. And histories help us preserve those communities not only through their origin stories but also through the narratives that unfold from them. *The Douglass Century* gives us such a gift.

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