

Eells House Committee

Summary of Work and Context, 2022-23 Academic Year

May 2023 (with minor updates January 2024)

In the spring and summer of 2022, community members raised questions about the subject matter presented on the wallpaper in the Eells House Keehn Dining Room. The concerns centered on the images of Indigenous Americans and American Descendants of Slaves depicted on the wallpaper. In response, President David Wippman formed a committee and charged it to:

Identify, discuss, and make recommendations to the president regarding the issues raised by the wallpaper in the Eells House Keehn Dining Room, considered in the context of the College's history and its educational, co-curricular, and DEI goals, as well as the broader context of contemporary views on public art and historical representation.

This report summarizes the work of the committee during the fall and spring of 2022-23. Specific recommendations will be the subject of a later report.

The Eells House Committee

The Eells House Committee (EHC) has representation from disparate backgrounds, affiliations with the College and greater community, and specialists to facilitate the discussion and recommendation(s) it will provide to President Wippman. The Eells House Committee composition and titles at the time of writing include:

- Nathan Goodale, Chair (Assoc. Dean of Faculty for Arts & Sciences, Professor of Anthropology)
- Sean Bennett (Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion)
- Mark Harrington '23 (Alpha Delta Phi, President Hamilton Chapter)
- Emily Jiang '25 (past Student Assembly President)
- Derek Montroy (Member Outreach and Advocacy Coordinator, Oneida Indian Nation)
- Monty Pooley '84 (Charter Trustee, Alpha Delta Phi member)
- Ty Seidule (Visiting Professor of History)

Additional members were originally appointed but were unable to serve due to other responsibilities. The EHC met weekly on Mondays from 3:30-4:30 p.m. in the Eells House Keehn Dining Room with a Zoom option for those committee members not on campus.

Through the Fall 2022 and Spring 2023 semesters, the EHC worked to establish the scope of research and the information-gathering process, identify representatives of the College who should be consulted for background and context regarding the current operations of the Eells House Keehn Dining Room, and identify stakeholders across the College and local area who should be consulted in making a recommendation.

Information Gathering

View of America: Zuber Wallpaper Context

Vues d'Amérique du Nord (Views of America) is an early example of original French panoramic wallpaper sets designed by Jean-Jaques Deltil and block-printed by Jean Zuber of Zuber et Cie beginning in 1834, in Rixheim, France. A hallmark of the time, the scenes and artistry of the wallpaper were developed through an armchair process of secondary or even tertiary accounts of the New World, and neither individual responsible for *Vues*' production likely ever visited North America (Cobb 2015b; Emlen 1997). Notably, the literature of Jacques-Gerard Milbert created through his travels and service as an engineer with the Erie Canal Commission in America was likely influential in the creation of *Vues* (Cobb 2015a: 68).

The wallpaper depicts a “vision” of what life was like in 1830s America, including scenic backdrops and inhabitants of the time. The EHC has reflected on this description of the wallpaper and believes that while the wallpaper does depict real places in the Americas, the scenes would be more accurately described as inaccurate and idealized, rather than a reflection of the reality of life in America in the 1820-30s. This follows a time when popular portrayals of race relations began to enter media productions in the U.S. and France (Cobb 2015a:68). However, the aspirant images are a misrepresentation of the past. In line with the aforementioned media trends of the time, *Vues* also features the caricature or cartoonish depictions of freed Black Americans dressed in high fashion and posed in caricatures that are particularly linked to famous nationalist and racist cartoons of the time (Clay 1828). The cartoonish depictions of Black individuals in the wallpaper imagery and dressed in fine clothing is befitting an idealized and inaccurate fantasy of American “racial equity.” The scenes depicted in *Vues* do resemble natural and human-made landmarks in America, and cultural materials in various forms of accuracy, as well as people engaged in hypothetical social situations dressed in fashions of the times. This includes a depiction of Indigenous people engaged in a performance while dressed in attire not indicative of dress for Indigenous people of the region. Though it aspires to be a portrayal of American life, *Vues*' French artistry does not take the viewpoint of Black or Indigenous Americans, or even any American. These issues, in combination with several items of technology that also appear to be fictitious, lend to the reasons the EHC views the wallpaper as inaccurate and idealized, obscuring the truth of Black and Indigenous life, and life in general, in America at the time.

Producing the wallpaper includes a difficult and time-consuming process. Approximately every five years the company makes a new set of wallpaper. The process includes the use of 1,690 hand-carved wooden blocks and 223 colors (Cobb 2015b: 216). The EHC had extensive conversations regarding the “artistry” of the *Vues* wallpaper. In one sense the wallpaper can be considered a beautiful and artistic expression of life in early America. In another sense it is a commercial product, meant to be reproduced and sold on open markets, likely to wealthy consumers. During our research, the EHC also found that the process to create the wallpaper is protected as significant to French cultural history, but the actual wallpaper does not retain the same protection (Milbert 1968; Nalewaja ND).

Eells House Context

Alpha Delta Phi was established in October 1832 by Hamilton student Samuel Eells, Class of 1832. The Hamilton chapter is the founding chapter of the international fraternity. Eells House was home to the Alpha Delta Phi fraternity until the late 1990s when Hamilton College purchased the facility from the fraternity (Rogers 2022). Upon the transition from the fraternity to the College, the facility underwent a

significant renovation, including an addition on the south side of the building and significant renovation to the interior. Currently, Eells House functions as a residence hall housing approximately 75 to 80 students. The first floor has three rooms used for special events. Two of the rooms are open and can be used by the residents at will. The Keehn Dining Room is a restricted space, used on a limited basis by special permission only.

The original *Vues d'Amérique du Nord* wallpaper in Eells House was installed in the 1920s. At the time of renovation in 1999, the original wallpaper in the dining room was in poor condition. A specialist was consulted to restore the first-generation wallpaper but determined restoration was not possible (the wallpaper had been coated in a type of lacquer causing “yellowing”), so the original paper was removed and replaced with a new set of the same *Vues d'Amérique du Nord* wallpaper. Two complete sets of the wallpaper were purchased. One complete set and one partial set were installed in the dining room in 1999-2000, backed with muslin so that the paper could be easily removed without damage and repurposed in the future (Nalewaja, ND). The remainder of the second set was sold to the Farmer’s Museum in Cooperstown, N.Y., for use in its historic wallpaper educational program. The cost of the wallpaper’s removal, purchase, and reinstallation was about \$50,000 (\$32,000 to purchase the new sets and \$17,900 to take down the old wallpaper and install the new sets; \$1,500 was recouped by selling the remainder of the second set to the Farmer’s Museum). The cost of the wallpaper portion of the Eells House project was folded into the renovation costs for the building (the total cost to renovate Eells House was about \$3 million). The committee did not identify any special funds set aside from donors to specifically reinstall the *Vues d'Amérique du Nord* wallpaper. However, Marjorie Keehn, wife of former trustee Grant Keehn ’21, chose the original wallpaper in the dining room, which was dedicated to the Keehn Family in recognition of their philanthropic relationship with the College following renovations to the building in 1999-00.

The function and frequency of the Keehn Dining Room’s use has been a consistent theme in the EHC conversations. The Division of Student Life at the College controls access to the Keehn Dining Room, with guidelines managed through the College Events and Scheduling Office for booking the space through 25Live. The guidelines state that the dining room is a special-use facility where only “special events” are approved to use the room, and the room is intended to be reserved for meals only. The EHC reviewed data provided by the College Events Office of scheduled events in the dining room back to 2009 and agrees the events fit the scheduling guidelines. A total of 181 unique events were held in the Eells House Keehn Dining Room from spring 2009 to fall 2022. The events were of special purpose, including student award ceremonies, society induction dinners, holiday dinners (for students on campus), and events for the President’s Office such as honorary degree dinners, alumni events, and Board of Trustee dinners.

What do institutions do with Vues?

Hamilton College is not alone in having *Vues* wallpaper hanging on walls within the institution and grappling with what to do with it (Smulyan 2020). Most famously, *Vues* wallpaper hangs in the Diplomatic Reception Room of the White House, after Jacqueline Kennedy installed the paper during her

renovation of the historic mansion to highlight her ambition of helping Americans develop “a greater appreciation of the history of America’s most famous residence” (John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum 2014; Emlen 1997). The EHC attempted unsuccessfully to reach officials at the White House for more information or to see if a representative would schedule a meeting with the committee.

Vues currently hangs in the halls of the Nightingale-Brown House at Brown University. The EHC had an informative conversation with Dietrich Nuemann, professor of history of art and architecture, director of the John Nicholas Brown Center for Public Humanities and Cultural Heritage, and professor of Italian studies at Brown. In 2019, Brown University students criticized the presence of *Vues* in an academic space (Smulyan 2020). Subsequent to the criticism, Brown entered into a phase of education about the wallpaper, resulting in multiple artists and classes developing artwork installations over and around the wallpaper in order to give a contemporary context and response to the wallpaper. To the EHC’s understanding, Brown continues to be engaged in this educational endeavor.

Similar to Hamilton, the majority of the *Vues* wallpaper at Brown was installed during recent renovations, although a three-meter section of the original 1920s installation still hangs in the Nightingale-Brown House. There are also shared sentiments displayed around the wallpaper to act as an educational tool by some faculty, alumni, and students. In addition, the original owners of the facility (which was once their family home), have an interest in the wallpaper. In contrast to Hamilton, the wallpaper at Brown hangs in an actively used and busy academic space (Smulyan 2020).

The EHC also spent time considering a situation with a mural that was formerly installed in the Black Room of The Log, a dining facility owned by Williams College. The mural depicted Colonel Ephraim Williams and Mohawk Leader Theyanoguin (Hendrick) before both were killed in the Battle of Lake George in 1755 (Williams College 2016). A process to consider the mural began in 2015 and originally directed the College to assume ownership of the mural and take responsibility for contextualizing it around productive educational conversations. By 2020 this path was abandoned and the mural was removed and transferred to the library’s Special Collection Archive (Arias and Hartigan 2020).

Finally, the EHC talked with Rebecca Hong, the director of institutional equity at The Spence School. The Spence School is a private, all-girls K-12 school in New York City. At The Spence School, *Vues* hung in several spaces used for academic, co-curricular, and business purposes, but was a source of pain for many community members. *Vues* was the subject of conversation for some time at The Spence School, the first being in the 1990s with an academic course titled “Is the wallpaper racist?” Moving forward, the head of the school appointed a committee that recommended the wallpaper be contextualized and used as a learning and educational tool. To support this objective, The Spence School devised programming to mount exhibits around the wallpaper. The first such exhibit solicited input from the community with the prompt “Tell us in 500 words about how you have navigated race in America.” The exhibit ultimately hung pictures and stories of individuals who were significant to community members and who made important contributions toward their own navigation of race in America. The overall sense of the EHC was that this project and exhibit were beneficial and there was a sense of calming and healing around an exhibit composed of stories from the community. While the exhibit was well received, we do not know if it actually changed the way individual community members felt about *Vues*. When the COVID-19 global pandemic began, the head of the school, in consultation with the board, decided to remove the wallpaper

during the school's shutdown in the wake of the killing of George Floyd. The wallpaper was taken down and is now in storage for The Spence School.

The EHC finds that in the cases at The Spence School and at Brown University, in order to justify the continued display of *Vues* by uplifting marginalized voices, BIPOC community members and external specialists (e.g., artists, experts) were disproportionately called on to contribute emotional, intellectual, creative, and physical labor.

Vues at Hamilton

The EHC has met with many stakeholders who have varied interactions and connections with the wallpaper in the Eells House Keehn Dining Room. Questions about the wallpaper originally surfaced during the spring of 2022 from students enrolled in the summer Opportunity Program. The program was looking for a group study space and a place where students could build community. Ultimately, after viewing the dining room, leadership of the Opportunity Program felt that without first contextualizing the images on the wallpaper, use of the space would distract from the goals of the program and would not be an appropriate introduction to the College community for a group of students from marginalized backgrounds.

The Eells House and Keehn Dining Room still hold significant regard for many alumni of Alpha Delta Phi. The dining room was used for meals on a regular basis and these experiences for this population of alumni cannot be understated. While the actual wallpaper hanging in the room is a different vintage of *Vues*, the original tables and chairs still occupy the room and the wallpaper is likely hanging in a similar manner, reminiscent of the original dining room.

The EHC is also mindful that the subject matter of *Vues* can be alienating and hurtful to people from marginalized backgrounds, further compounding notions and feelings of belonging, or the lack thereof, on Hamilton's campus. Some images or representations that may seem uncontroversial to some, can be part of the many small issues that build up oppressive feelings for marginalized community members over time. We have to acknowledge that there is an emotional cost to community members when predominantly white institutions reckon with their own history and norms.

The EHC provides a summary of perspectives regarding the wallpaper:

- There is nostalgia associated with the Keehn Dining Room for some community members and the wallpaper is part of their relationship with the College.
- A member of the committee has extensive experience making recommendations for monuments that were erected with the explicit malintent of supporting white supremacy. We concur that while several of the images depicted on the wallpaper are racist and depict an inaccurate and idealized view of America in the early 19th century, it is more difficult to characterize this aspirational piece from a French artist as an intentional tool for propagating racism in America in a similar way as monuments erected in the aftermath of the Civil War.
- The EHC considers the notion that we use our surroundings on campus to instruct our students as an important feature of a residential campus. However, the relevance to using the *Vues* wallpaper

for instructional purposes is not clear to us, at least in a manner that would justify it being permanently installed on campus.

- In order to open the Keehn Dining Room for continued use (even continuing with restricted access), we cannot proceed with the status quo. The wallpaper will need to be addressed in some manner.
- There will be a considerable investment in employee time, emotional labor, and expense to program around this wallpaper in order to contextualize it. These efforts will necessitate continuing expense, both monetary and emotional, because the exhibits would need to change regularly. There will be a cost for our community to engage with this wallpaper and to participate in similar activities to The Spence School and Brown University exhibits.
- The Keehn Dining Room will still be in a student residential building, meaning the scheduling restrictions may need to be revisited if the room is to be used more frequently.
- As we move forward, it is important that the College does not expect its marginalized community members to take on the responsibility to react and address *Vues*, but the College will amplify those voices if they choose to engage.

Moving Forward

At the time of writing this first report, the EHC has primarily met with stakeholders who have had a logistical role in overseeing the renovation, scheduling, and use of the Keehn Dining Room, and has held meetings with representatives from other institutions that have been engaged with *Vues* or other historical murals. The EHC plans to continue its work in a next phase through expanded community stakeholder information-gathering by administering a survey for alumni, students, and employees to help move our considerations toward a viable path forward. This phase of work will focus on the individual experiences with the wallpaper and the Keehn Dining Room, ultimately leading to our recommendations.

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