

## **Eells House Committee**

### **Second Report and Final Recommendations**

After reporting the results of committee work from the 2022-23 academic year, the Eells House Committee continued its study in 2023-24, which included meetings with alumni, student, staff, and faculty leaders. This report summarizes information received from those meetings and concludes with the committee's final recommendations to President Wippman on the future of the *Vues d'Amérique du Nord* (*Views of America*) wallpaper by Zuber et Cie, Rixheim, France that currently adorns the walls in the Eells House Keehn Dining Room.

The committee's charge is 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.*

EHC continuing members in 2023-24 include:

- Nathan Goodale, Chair (Assoc. Vice President for Academic Affairs, Professor of Anthropology)
- Sean Bennett (Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion)
- Mark Harrington '23 (Alpha Delta Phi, Past President Hamilton Chapter)
- 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)

### **EHC Process for 2023-24**

The EHC took a short hiatus during the summer of 2023 then planned to resume meeting in the fall. Due to campus and global events occurring that semester, the committee postponed its work to spring 2024. The spring 2024 EHC process included scheduling and conducting conversations with leaders from various stakeholders. Prior to each of those meetings, participants of the stakeholder groups were asked to review the first EHC report, take a virtual tour of the dining room, and complete an optional survey intended to gather individual opinions.

The EHC wanted to ensure the invited community leaders could speak openly, have their point-of-view heard and considered, and be fairly represented. Participants were assured that conversations would not be attributable to any one individual or stakeholder group, and that results from the survey would be anonymous and presented in the aggregate.

The Eells House Keehn Dining Room remained closed while the committee conducted its work.

### ***Community Conversations with Leaders of Stakeholder Groups***

The EHC engaged with leaders of stakeholder groups representing students, alumni, staff, and faculty in community conversations. The committee met on Monday afternoons in the spring of 2024 and hosted 11 community conversations that included more than 60 participants from January 15 to March 25, 2024. Invitations sent to stakeholder leaders included the first report of the Eells House Committee and access to a virtual tour that provided both overview and close-up images of the dining room and wallpaper. The committee requested participants review the report and the virtual tour prior to the meeting so that attendees' discussion of the wallpaper was informed to a similar level as the committee. All discussions were approximately 50 minutes in length and occurred over Zoom.

Members of the EHC extended outreach to a representative sample of organizations and leaders groups. Throughout the process, special consideration was given to welcome the perspectives of marginalized groups, particularly those represented in the wallpaper. We engaged with elected faculty leaders and those with related interests. Representatives from alumni groups, employees spanning College operations, and student leaders of different groups were included in the community conversations and consulted throughout this process.

### ***Survey Instrument and Responses***

The survey instrument was foregrounded in each meeting as the place where individuals could provide their own opinions. This allowed the committee to focus the conversation around participant's perspectives as leaders of the stakeholder groups and the constituents they represented. The survey was provided to participants upon the conclusion of each community conversation. The survey included the following questions and summary statistics:

- Have you been in the Keehn Dining Room in the Eells House prior to this experience?
  - Yes = 49%, Maybe = 9%, No = 39%, No Response = 3%
- If yes, approximately how many times have you been in the room?
  - Answers range from 1 time to more than 50 times
- What event(s) did you attend in the dining room?
  - Answers included: dinners, special events, social events, personal use when left open
- My initial reaction to the room when first entering it was:
  - Approval = 30%, Neutral = 47%, Disapproval = 5%, No Response = 18%
- My reaction to the room after viewing the wallpaper content:
  - Approval = 16%, Neutral = 22%, Disapproval = 50%, No Response = 12%
- My reaction to the aesthetics and/or color palette of the wallpaper:
  - Approval = 44%, Neutral = 31%, Disapproval = 16%, No Response = 9%
- Please add any additional thoughts that you would like to share with the committee regarding the Eells House Keehn Dining Room or the current decor:
  - Open text responses will not be reported to respect anonymity. The committee can report that answers to the open text response question reflected the conversations with stakeholder leaders.

The survey indicated that 77% of respondents had either a favorable or neutral reaction when first entering the room, and that combined percentage dropped to only 38% after viewing the content of the

wallpaper. Three out of four respondents had a favorable or neutral initial reaction to the aesthetics of the room based on the color palette of the wallpaper. Based on these aggregate data, respondents reacted positively to the aesthetics of the room, but reactions dropped nearly 40 percentage points when considering the content of the wallpaper. The disapproval rating increases from 5% of respondents to more than 50% of respondents after viewing the content.

### **Summary of Community Conversations**

Feedback from surveys and the community conversations directly informed the committee's recommendations for the future of the wallpaper. The following summary captures dominant themes expressed across all conversations with the EHC. Literal transcriptions were not captured to preserve the anonymity of groups and individuals.

- Access to the dining room is of utmost importance to those who have a connection through history and tradition to the Keehn Dining Room, and that access to the space is prioritized over nearly any other facet to the building. It was also expressed that any solution should not limit access in the short term, and that the path forward, including the results from recommendations made by the committee, should be lasting. We also heard that the room should be open and available for more general use in addition to being used for special events.
- It was suggested that it may be difficult for alumni to understand the 21st century context of Greek life on Hamilton's campus and that considerable changes have occurred in how Greek students engage with our campus and local communities. Decor in a room that was once appropriate may no longer hold the same regard.
- There is a significant contingent of community members who are very concerned about the images in the wallpaper. Although most students have not seen the wallpaper, the committee was asked to strongly consider the negative impact of the paper as part of a residential space. At a residential college, residence halls are the students' homes while they are on campus, and it becomes problematic when there is institutionally sanctioned decor that makes students uncomfortable within their residence.
- Images that are idealistic, false, and/or biased in their depictions of human representation in the past are highly problematic when adequate context is not provided or the academic integrity of studying such representation is not foregrounded.
- The Keehn Dining Room is generally considered to be a special and attractive space that should be used by the College. The wallpaper is often described as beautiful, but the content makes many people uncomfortable, especially after closer inspection.
- Conversations involving many different stakeholders suggested there are educational opportunities for our students with the current *Vues* wallpaper, from analysis of the content and historical context of the wallpaper to the artistic technique and relief methods used to create it. The committee agrees that the wallpaper provides educational opportunities.
- There were a variety of comments around removing the wallpaper. Some participants expressed concern that removal of the wallpaper would make the room a less special place. We heard that even for those who oppose the content of the wallpaper, they do not favor destroying it. Others expressed concern over the potential loss of an educational artifact and emphasized their desire to utilize the paper for ongoing educational purposes.

- Members of the Keehn family were included in the conversations. Their interests included 1) acknowledgment that the choice of the paper was not intended in any way to show disrespect or cause discomfort to members of the Hamilton community and 2) that the recognition of the Keehn family's affection for and support of Hamilton College represented in the dining hall is in no way compromised.

## **Recommendations**

The committee's recommendations are guided by a review of and a reflection on the following institutional documents and principles: Hamilton's [mission statement](#), the College's [educational goals](#), and the community's diversity, equity, and inclusion [values statement](#). For broader context, the committee also considered Hamilton's history dating to its founding as the Hamilton-Oneida Academy in 1793 and gave particular attention to the students the institution seeks to serve today. Information from throughout this process, including issues of representation on campus that were expressed during the community conversations, were weighed heavily in forming the following recommendations.

### ***Principles Informing the Recommendations:***

- The context of the wallpaper in the College's history and its current location in a student residential facility
  - The Keehn Dining Room holds significance in Hamilton traditions, but because the Eells House is currently used as a student residence, access to the dining room will continue to be restricted (i.e., it cannot have open access like an academic building).
  - The process of creating the wallpaper and the woodblocks used in its printing are protected as French historic monuments, however, the current wallpaper in Eells House is only about 25 years in age and does not enjoy the same protection. *Vues* is still manufactured and can be purchased and installed today.
- The content of the wallpaper can be offensive and uncomfortable for members of our community and inaccurate representations, particularly related to race, are highly problematic in a residence hall.
  - The context and access to the wallpaper make it challenging, if not impossible (and certainly impractical), to develop educational programming to adequately explain the wallpaper to every person who enters the Eells House Keehn Dining Room. Static efforts (such as informational materials placed in the room) are not sufficient to explain the content and place an additional burden on individuals visiting the room without the benefit of instruction. The committee is not convinced that even more elaborate static presentations to explain the content of the wallpaper, such as a series of plaques, would adequately address concerns.
  - The content of the wallpaper can present educational opportunities for community members, and the committee wants to support such initiatives.
- Traditions and Educational Opportunities
  - Given the context and content of the wallpaper, inclusion is likely best served by preserving the wallpaper and making it available for access in an appropriate place on campus.

- Educational opportunities will be best achieved with this wallpaper by faculty situating the historical context of the wallpaper so that students can be led through difficult conversations to enhance their learning.
- The Keehn Dining Room holds a significant place in the history and traditions of the College. Recommendations should reflect what inclusion can mean for our alumni, students, staff, and faculty.

### *Final Recommendations*

- **Professionally remove the *Vues* wallpaper and preserve it**
  - Reinstall one full set of the *Vues* wallpaper on canvas boards so that they can be easily stored and accessed for educational use.
- **Transfer the *Vues* wallpaper to the College Archives with the expectation that one complete set would be retained for future educational use.** The wallpaper will be subject to the terms and curation policies of the College Archives.
- **If necessary, when transitioning to the new room decor, temporarily paint the room** above the wainscoting with a blue hue to complement the horizon color of the *Vues* wallpaper and keep the room's aesthetics similar to its current state.
- **Expediently restore access to the room with some modifications to allowable reservations overseen by the Dean of Students, College Events and Scheduling, and the President's Office**
  - Once the *Vues* wallpaper has been removed, make the room reservable for general student use, such as for studying and group activities
  - Retain Alpha Delta Phi's access for monthly dinners in the room by reservation
  - Continue allowing the dining room to be reserved for special events, including induction ceremonies, meals with honored guests, and other events
  - Install protective barriers on the tables
    - With assistance from the College Archives, place tabletop cards on the fixtures to explain the history of the dining room's tables and chairs.
- **Replace the wallpaper with Zuber's [Isola Bella](#)**
  - *Isola Bella* is a like-and-kind wallpaper that:
    - is manufactured with the same process as *Vues* using its own 765 carved wood blocks;
    - has a similar color palette;
    - features plants and horizon lines; and
    - closely approximates the aesthetics of the room
- **Place an information plaque at one of the entrances to the dining room**
  - *The Grant and Marjorie Keehn Dining Room is a significant place in the history and tradition of Hamilton College. The room has been used for meals for members of the Alpha Delta Phi fraternity where generations of Alpha Deltas gathered making significant memories of their time at Hamilton. In 2024, the Eells House Committee, appointed by the president, recommended that the *Vues d'Amérique du Nord (Views of America)* wallpaper by Zuber et Cie, Rixheim, France be replaced with another wallpaper in like-and-kind to make the dining room a more inclusive space for students at Hamilton*

*College while protecting the beauty and majestic characteristics of the hall. The Vues wallpaper may be accessed by contacting the College Archives.*

- **Provide copies of the two reports by the EHC to the College Archives where they can be accessible with the wallpaper.**

### **Concluding Thoughts**

The Eells House Committee also included a representative from the Oneida Indian Nation to ensure an indigenous perspective was heard throughout our process and to help guide our discussions with the stakeholder groups. Through those discussions, the partnership between the College and the Oneida Indian Nation has grown exponentially, and while we are disappointed to not incorporate a solution that included our founding partner more extensively due to the room's limited access, the committee believes there will be more publicly accessible opportunities on the Hamilton campus in the future to represent local Oneida and Haudenosaunee culture.