Archival research has interested me for a number of years, but I had never had the opportunity to do research in an archive until coming to Wellesley. When we were given the opportunity to do a research paper in HIST 254: The U.S. in WWII with one of the potential overarching focuses being Wellesley during the war, I jumped at the idea. We had discussed war paranoia in class and discrimination towards Japanese-Americans, but hadn’t delved into one particular institution or town. As Wellesley used to be rather racially homogenous back in the day, I wondered how its racial homogeneity may have affected the treatment of Japanese-American students during the war years. I soon found out that ethnic and racial composition information was not available during this time period, but I was still able to find several Japanese-American students that attended Wellesley College between 1941 and 1945, when the U.S. was officially engaged in WWII.

Since there was little data to address, I took a primarily qualitative approach to the research. Firstly, I looked into Wellesley’s Digital Repository where I was able to find dozens of Wellesley newspaper issues, many of which had articles regarding Japan, Japanese-Americans, and discrimination. I focused primarily from Dec. 1941 to August 1945, but broadened slightly as some material in the Digital Repository had relevant information outside of this timeframe such as Mildred McAfee’s personal papers. Wellesley’s alumni website was also helpful as I found an obituary for a Japanese-American student who attended the college in the 1940s. With these names and ideas in mind, I took my research to the in person archives where I viewed scrapbooks, a photo album, biographical file, and the majority of the print magazines/journals that Wellesley students published during the war years. I even reached out to faculty who had connections to the students I focused on. Professor Jim Kodera had been friends with one of the women and he pointed me in the direction of a book that had an interview from an alum. As I was nearing my deadline, I was a bit worried I wouldn’t be able to get my hands on the book in time, but luckily Clapp Library not only had it on hand, but had it digitally.

With the various ways I obtained information, I became more adept at using online resources such as the Digital Repository and the online library database, and I finally had the opportunity to do archival research. In the archives, I learned what materials I needed gloves for and what materials seemed to be decaying faster. Point being, do not use cork as a scrapbook cover.

Luckily, based on this research, I was able to rely heavily on primary sources as well as some secondary sources with quotes from ethnically Japanese alums. I gravitated towards the primary sources as they were the most accurate depictions of Wellesley students’ views at the time. People often change their opinions on war and racism, and either intentionally or not, they may give an inaccurate explanation of their views at the time.
Throughout this process it became clear that there was a strong mix of viewpoints and a visible tension at the college. I observed a mix of relatively progressive and rather racist viewpoints and assumptions, which informed my thesis that the college was divided, or at least in tension regarding Japanese people and those of Japanese descent.

Potentially the most important source of learning in this endeavor was that most information is out there if you are determined and brave enough to seek it out. Sometimes people have yet to publicize what we can find in primary sources, and sometimes their analysis doesn’t align with our view of reality, so we must thoroughly research and question what we know and what we have yet to know.