The rise of industrial capitalism in the 19th century reshaped class distinctions according to gender. Yet while working-class women found new economic independence as wage laborers, ironically middle-class women, with fewer opportunities to work outside the home, were at a distinct disadvantage. The dramatic growth in the number of unmarried, “redundant” women prompted a search for new areas of work open to single women. Although overlooked by both labor and science historians, a significant opportunity for the second generation of university-educated women came in the newly emerging experimental sciences such as ecology, radioactivity, and genetics, which were not yet attractive to men. Using the new Mendelian genetics as a case study, this paper will show how women graduating with scientific degrees after 1900 increasingly sought employment in science not simply as a calling but also as an economic necessity, soon becoming a vital component of the scientific workforce, filling positions in the new experimental laboratories of both universities and private research institutes.

Marsha L. Richmond is Associate Professor in the Department of History. Her current research focuses on the entry of women into academic biology, and she is collaborating on a book project entitled “Women in Early Genetics,” in which she focuses on American and European women.