

Westford Academy student founded Wellesley College

By GORDON B. SEAVEY

WESTFORD — Not all students at Westford Academy, and perhaps not any, will be expected to equal the success of one Henry Fowle Durant who placed a cool million dollars on the line to found Wellesley College, which should do for the women what New England colleges did for men.

Dusty records show that he entered the local Academy in 1834 at the age of 12 under his baptismal name of Henry Welles Smith. He then was graduated at age 19 from Harvard College in 1841, along with only 44 others, many of whom were considered "Boston Bluebloods." Why his name was changed will come later.

Westford Academy was founded in 1792 as a private institution, attracting boarding students from neighboring communities as well as the immediate area. The Smith family had moved to Lowell, where it remained for some time, because their Dracut home burned to the ground.

HENRY AND HIS brother William were enrolled in the Academy in August, 1834, the starting period then for the fall term. Their mother wrote to one of her sisters:

"My dear boys are now at school, about 10 miles from us. They probably may both fit for College by the autumn of next year. They are somewhat ambitious, and seem determined to succeed. Their instructors think they have minds desirous of culture, and that they may fill places of usefulness with credit to themselves and their friends."

How correct she was in observing this trait when Henry was only a mere youth.

He was the son of William Smith, a lawyer, who came from Hanover, N.H., first to Dracut and then to Lowell. Along with his brother, William, they became partners with Benjamin F. Butler. The law firm was called Smith, Butler and Smith. Of the three men, it was said that he had the

keenest intellect and an almost boundless capacity for work.

Henry Smith moved to Boston and opened a law office in Scollay Square where his ability drew him a large practice. Other "Smiths" with a name identical or nearly so with his led him to change his own. He took the name of Henry Fowle Durant, the latter being the name of his mother and also the name of a branch of the family which was then prominent in Paris. Through an act of legislation, he assumed a new name.

AT THE BAR he was known as one of the keenest intellects who ever argued a case. His practice was confined to civil cases and for several years he tried more cases in the Boston courts than any other member of the bar; he rarely lost a case.

It is said that "he worked with remarkable industry, and, ever making the case of the client his own, he was enabled to make his appeal to juries with wonderful power."

After only two decades in legal work, he was considered one of the wealthiest lawyers in New England, and his business was increasing.

Durant had married Pauline A. Fowle of Alexandria, Va., a woman whose marvelous executive ability had been well mated with her

husband's "high intellectual gifts, and whose strong Christian character had great influence in bringing about the great change in Mr. Durant's opinions and habits of life which terminated his legal career."

In his practice, Durant received heavy fees and the best cases. He won for Goodyear Rubber a famous case concerning patents. During his involvement, he became interested in the great value of the patent and invested largely in the rubber business. This was the major contribution to his fortune, although there were others.

THEN CAME THE end of Durant's legal career in 1863. Their only son died of a "rare" disease. He was only eight but already had shown to be a boy of "rare promise and lovely character."

Durant then turned right-about-face and became an evangelist. During this period he and his wife dreamed of a special college for women and so he founded Wellesley in 1870.

The idea was carried to a successful completion in 1875 when the first building was

opened, signifying the crowning achievement in his life. Durant, together with his wife, gave much of their time and personality to the famous institute.

The cost of the building was a million dollars, to which he added \$50,000 each year for maintenance. College Hall was built with day labor and was one-eighth of a mile long. In the basement, one could look from one end to the other. A central stairway led up the five stories to the roof. It was described as one of the most beautiful specimens of architecture about Boston.

Alas, a fire destroyed most of the building in 1914 and the end of College Hall. What firefighters were able to save was remodelled into apartments for college help and is still in use today.

On the site of College Hall, three large buildings were erected subsequently as the college rebuilt along housing and academic lines to become the physical institution it is today. Old College Hall faced away from the lake, but the newer buildings, in reverse, have a fine view of the college pond.