

The Founding of Whitin Observatory

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The whole story of Mrs. John C. Whitin's gift of the Whitin Observatory, an addition to it, and Observatory House as a residence for the astronomers is delightful, and, thanks to the accounts which Sarah Frances Whiting, the first Professor of Physics and of Astronomy, wrote and to the correspondence which she carefully preserved, can be completely reconstructed, although only a few of its highlights are given here.

Miss Whiting wrote: "By Mr. Durant's initiative, in 1880 a semester's worth in Astronomy especially emphasizing Astrophysics, a department of the subject then very new, was offered very properly as Applied Physics. ... A 4" telescope, which could be placed on the roof of the north or south porch of College Hall, the spectrum appliances of the Department of Physics, a constantly growing library, and collections of lantern slides were the only equipment. Not until 1896 was the present unsurpassed students' observatory begun. By an unpremeditated combination of events, which we are wrongly apt to call chance, Mrs. J. C. Whitin, a recently elected trustee of the College, became interested to purchase a telescope which had, by courtesy, been used by the writer when teaching Olmstead's Astronomy in Brooklyn, and which was offered for sale. As she learned what was the ideal observatory for a college, this generous donor enlarged her plans to build the east-west part of the observatory. This, with its equipment, was opened in 1900 with appropriate exercises in the Chapel, addresses by distinguished astronomers and congratulatory letters from famous women astronomers in Europe.

"When the space proved inadequate for the laboratory work of the large classes, Mrs. Whitin doubled the Observatory in 1909, provided added equipment, and built a house for the residence of the staff. This

work was done in the spirit of the founder of the College, who believed that beauty is essential to the highest development of the student. When someone said to Mr. Durant, 'Why have you put those beautiful paintings into the hall and decorated the Browning Room when you say the College needs money?' 'I must do this,' was the reply, 'for I see the necessity of it; others can see and will meet the more obvious needs.' Mrs. Whitin expressed the same idea when she said in answer to a remark that a rug would not be necessary in a laboratory: 'you and Miss Hayes can attend to the science; it will be good for the girls to put their feet on an India rug.'"

At Float Night in 1896, only a few months after Mrs. Whitin of Whitinsville had become a trustee, Miss Whiting mentioned to her a 12" telescope (still in use in the Observatory) which had suddenly become available at a bargain price. Mrs. Whitin wrote to Miss Whiting on July 20, 1899, "I had very little idea when it was first talked of except that Mr. S. V. White's telescope and dome could be set up at Wellesley for the girls' use. It is a kind of evolution. Once interested in it, my desires grew by the information they fed on, and I desired to do what I did do correctly, and I always liked the correct thing to look well!" On another occasion she wrote, "You need not feel that you have made extravagant suggestions. It is only the carrying out of my own ideas as they become broader... My ideas are now way ahead of the little observatory or of my bank account, else it would be far better than it will be!"

In the fall of 1898 she proposed to give, and the Trustees "voted to accept with gratitude," "a 12" telescope and a simple building to house the instrument." Then at a Trustees meeting the following May, "Mrs. Whitin stated that she now proposes to construct the Observatory of white marble in

place of brick.” When it was formally opened on October 8, 1900, Miss Hazard could report that it housed “a 12” refractor with micrometer, polarizing photometer, and star and sun spectroscopes. A Rowland concave grating spectroscope, of 6’ focus, with its accompanying heliostat, is set up in a room capable of being darkened completely. The library is a beautiful room, and the dome by Warner and Swasey is all that it should be.”

Never has a donor taken greater interest in every detail of a building—and rarely has one lived near enough to make such frequent visits. Sometimes Mrs. Whitin arrived with a hamper of delicacies for lunch for herself and the two Whiting sisters. In her eagerness to have landscaping done she sent her gardener with bulbs, which died and she concluded she had been premature in having planted in November. When the house was nearing completion Mrs. Whitin wrote Miss Whiting “to have the architect order two oxidized iron ash barrels in cans for the cellar. Have them with ribs down the sides to protect them thusly,” and she drew a picture so there could be no mistake about the matter. Sometimes in her early morning notes, “usually written before the breakfast bell,” she vented her irritations (for example, “I do not want that common brass faucet. It is a poor thing.”). More often, however, she expressed her view of life (“ ‘Better to be wise in the light of today than consistent with the errors of yesterday,’ that’s my motto, and good sense and allows me to change my mind as often as I please.”), or showed her warm regard and respect for “dear Professor Whiting.” When Miss Whiting broke her arm, Mrs. Whitin sent her a note scrawled with her left hand, commenting, “how do you do it? I can’t seem to make it go! I might break my right arm, so I must practice!”

A later generous donor to the Observatory, also a widow living nearby, is Mrs. Margaret C. Sawyer, of Wellesley, who took some courses in the Astronomy Department, became interested in it, and in 1965 gave the College a 24” telescope.

This, with the classroom added in 1962, again make the Department’s facilities as outstanding in an undergraduate college as they were considered when Mrs. Whitin made her original gifts.

Miss Whiting also visited and carried on a voluminous correspondence with lady Huggins, a noted British astronomer in her own right whose husband, Sir William Huggins, was a president of the Royal Society. In an article “Priceless Accessions to Whitin Observatory” in the October 1914 issue of *Popular Astronomy*, Miss Whiting wrote: “Lady Huggins has been pleased to deposit in Whitin Observatory of Wellesley College—a Woman’s College, in a new world—certain of her more personal astronomical possessions.” Much of this fascinating material is in the “Huggins Case” in the Observatory; Lady Huggins’s jewelry and some other items are in the Rare Book Room of the Library.

Miss Whiting is the source of the information that “Mrs. Whitin’s interest in Wellesley College inspired a like interest in her sister-in-law, Mrs. Martha S. Pomeroy, whose will contained the provision of which this building [Pomeroy Hall] is the outcome. Pomeroy Hall was to be built for the convenience of astronomy students, but as there is no suitable place in the immediate vicinity of the observatory for erecting such a building, the west plateau was chosen as the nearest location.” Mrs. Pomeroy’s will requested the trustees to erect the dormitory “in the Elizabethan Gothic style of architecture.” And so, with the construction of Pomeroy Hall in 1904, was established the style of architecture for the dormitories built during Miss Hazard’s administration and in 1927 designated as the Hazard Quadrangle and marked by a bronze tablet and by a scallop shell, the symbol that she placed on all of the buildings erected during her administration.