

# Stellar WA grads leave a bright trail

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Contributing Writer

This is the fourth in a series of articles on the history of Westford Academy as it prepares to celebrate its bicentennial.

For more than 100 years, Westford Academy was a private secondary school and, as such, it attracted students from other communities as well as those living in Westford. Some out-of-towners commuted to school, like the Park brothers from South Chelmsford who walked to school each day. Others found board and room with families in the center of town.

In at least one case, a student's family pulled up roots and moved here so their daughter could enroll in the academy.

A number of Westford Academy students achieved national and international fame in later life in a variety of fields including medicine,

science, engineering, architecture, industry, writing and education.

Willard Parker, M.D. of Chelmsford became a world famous doctor and had a New York hospital named for him. Rufus Wyman, M.D. of Woburn made a name for himself in mental health.

Two women graduates achieved fame in science. Nettie Maria Stevens was the first to publish the scientific fact that sex is determined by x- and y-chromosomes, while Ellen (Swallow) Richards was the first woman student and also the first woman on the faculty at M.I.T.

It was Ellen's parents who moved from Dunstable to Westford so she could attend Westford Academy. Later, with a bachelor's and a master's degree from Vassar, she was admitted to M.I.T. as a "special student at no charge" because the president didn't want it known that he had accepted a woman student.

After graduation, Ellen married Prof. Robert Richards and became an instructor at M.I.T. Through her work in chemistry and domestic science, she was one of the first, if

not the first, to popularize the term *ecology* to describe the relationship between nature and humans.

Another former student, Loamm Baldwin of Woburn, became known as "the father of civil engineering in America." Ralph Adams Crain, the eminent architect was also a graduate of the Academy, as was Joseph A. Minott of Manchester, N.H., co-founder of the Goodyear Rubber Company.

Westford's Joel Abbot achieved recognition as a naval commander and a diplomat. Richard H. Dana, author of *Two Years Before the Mast* studied at Westford Academy in the 1820's.

The field of education was represented by Prof. Charles Franklin Emerson of Chelmsford, dean of Dartmouth College and Henry Towle Durant of Lowell.

In 1870 Henry and his wife founded Wellesley College on what had been their beautiful large estate.

During the years between 1792 and 1895, while Westford Academy was a private school, the majority of those enrolled in the school were by far Westford natives. The *General Catalog* covering the years 1792 through 1895 lists 101 members of the Fletcher family. Both the Hildreth and Wright families sent 78 students, while there were 76 Prescotts on the rolls.

Westford Academy not only produced many leaders but also adequately educated the youth of Westford.

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## WA students toe the mark

### Strict decorum was school rule in 1792

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The introduction of an unknown factor into an established environment always creates a certain amount of uneasiness and speculation as to the effect it will have on the quality of life.

The residents of Westford acted as could be expected when Zaccheus Wright, in 1792, announced his intention of opening a private secondary school in the center of town.

This new institution of learning, to be called Westford Academy, would be one of very few post-elementary grade schools in Massachusetts and could be expected to attract students from distant, as well as nearby communities, in addition to Westford residents. Some townspeople viewed the experiment as a boon to the town while others expressed their dismay with the 18th century equivalent of "there goes the neighborhood."

However, plans for the school included a list of rules which, among other things, would require the students to maintain proper decorum at all times. Rule #7 forbade students to leave the town of Westford without special permission; nor were they allowed to visit "any tavern, ale house or retail shop."

Students were prohibited from absenting themselves from classes unless through sickness or other special reasons for which permission had been granted.

The public was further protected by the rule that stated: "No person being a member of said school, in passing and repassing to and from the schoolhouse, shall be allowed to cross fields or orchards, or enter people's enclosures, but shall be required to go in the road."

Rule #9 would be unpopular with the student body today. "No person, being a member of said school, shall be absent from his or her lodging or place of abode after nine of the clock in the evening."

It was further stated that "the



school shall open and close with prayers,' the students supplying their own Bibles, as well as other books, paper, quills and ink.

Rule #14 stated that "all gaming prophanity, and other immoralities are strictly forbidden and the Preceptor (the one teacher) is authorized and required at all times to make diligent inquiry into the conduct of his pupils."

Obviously, secondary school education was taken very seriously by the Trustees and there was no provision for input from the students. One can easily predict the popularity of such regulations on today's students at Westford Academy.