Paulina Pinsky – Smith College: An Overview
February 23, 2015

Smith was chartered in 1870, and it was the third women’s institution to open in 1876, after Vassar (1865) and Wellesley (1875). Smith was funded by the estate of Sophia Smith, who died at the age of 65. Smith was always eager when it came to education, constantly writing and reading, but she was given a meager one. Sophia herself had a miserly family and a troubled adult hood, having 3 of her seven children die in infancy. But even so, she was deeply religious. Smith turned to her Pastor, John Morton Greene, to decide whom she would allocate her funds to. She considered Amherst College and Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, which was not a full fledged college at the time but did educate women. She settled on a variety of projects, one of which was a school for the deaf, which was a personal matter to her since she, too, was deaf. But the death of John Clarke, who gave his endowment to the school for the deaf, meant Smith could put her funds elsewhere. According to the Smith website, this was the statement in her will that bequeathed the funds: “‘I hereby make the following provisions for the establishment and maintenance of an Institution for the higher education of young women, with the design to furnish for my own sex means and facilities for education equal to those which are afforded now in our colleges to young men. It is my opinion that by the education of women, what are called their ‘wrongs’ will be redressed, their wages adjusted, their weight of influence in reforming the evils of society will be greatly increased, as teachers, as writers, as mothers, as members of society, their power for good will be incalculably enlarged. It is my wish that the institution be so conducted, that during all coming time it shall do the most good to the greatest number. I would have it a perennial blessing to the country and the world.” The college President, Laurenus Clark Seelye, was hired and was true to Sophia Smith’s vision.

The college now has a very career oriented lens about it, which is why it is difficult to find the original intent of the college. I was able to find that Article 3 of her will and testament says this, “Article 3: Sensible of what the Christian Religion has done for my sex, and believing that all education should be for the glory of God, and the good of man, I direct that the Holy Scriptures be daily and systematically read and studied in said College, and without giving preference to any sect or denomination, all the education and all the discipline shall be pervaded by the Spirit of Evangelical Christian Religion.” So it can be assumed that the college was created to have a Christian bent, especially since they were to read scripture “daily and systematically”. Although I would say that it is somewhat progressive that she notes that there is no “preference” to a denomination or sect, it still does have a lean towards a Christian doctrine.

Smith had strong leadership from the start. The first class consisted of fourteen students, with six faculty to instruct them. The small campus located in Northampton, Massachusetts, was far from the urban Barnard experience. The campus was planned to be a version of “the real practical life” of a New England town— a simulation of real life. Students lived in a “cottage,” “where life was more familial than institutional.” I think this “familial” like situation is reminiscent of Wellesley’s initial intent of creating a space for women to learn how to be educated homemakers. Although they have a very liberal, strictly academic leaning now, I think that the establishment of these cottages shows that they were still trying to enforce gender roles and educate them with the purpose of sharing their education within a home. The website states that the cottage system “began the “house” system that, with some modifications, the college still employs today.” I think the fact that they have to articulate that they modified the system may mean that it wasn’t as “liberal” as it it is now.

Sophia Smith appointed the first board of trustees in her will. She chose Honor Charles E. Forbes and Honor Osmyn Baker, both of Northampton, Reverend John M. Greene, of South Hadley, Professor Wm. S. Tyler, and Professor Julius H. Seelye, both of Amherst, Honor Wm. B. Washburn, of Greenfield, Professor. Edwards A. Park, of Andover, Honor Joseph White of Williamstown, Reverend B. G. Northrop of New Haven, Connecticut, Honor Edward B. Gillett of Westfield. and George W. Hubbard, of Hatfield. Of these 11 men, 5 were judges (Forbes, Baker, Washburn, Gillett, and White), 2 were Reverend’s (Greene and Northrop), 3 were professors (Tyler, Seelye, and Park), and one was Smith’s lawyer (Hubbard). As is apparent, this is a board with only educated men. They all are from wealthy, white areas. As is obvious, there are no women on the board, even though it was a woman’s funding that created this institution. Also, some of these men helped create the vision of Smith. Hubbard convinced Smith to shorten the title of the college from “Sophia Smith College” to plainly “Smith,” and he also convinced her to have it be located in Northampton.

Before they were established in 1872, Amherst Professor William S. Tyler, who would eventually teach at Smith, organized a meeting with a group of influential men that he hoed would contribute money to the endowment. They met at the Edwards Church in Northampton in 1872, and hoped to raise $75,000 for the building of the first building of the college. Speculations about the possible success was reported about in local newspapers, which helped draw attention to the project, and it could have been a way to advertise for potential students.
From the start, Smith had strong leadership, which lent to a strong academic standing early on. During the first 35 years of the college and under the sole leadership of President Seelye, Smith’s assets of about $400,000 grew too more than $3,000,000; its faculty grew from 7 to 122; its student body from 14 to 1,635; its buildings to 35 from one, College Hall, the “Victorian Gothic administrative and classroom building,” that stood at the head of Northampton’s Main Street (students used the public library and various churches in the town). That strong start was only maintained and strengthened by Smith’s second president, Marion LeRoy Burton, who took office in 1910. He helped raise the huge sum of $1,000,000, which President Burton used to increase faculty salaries substantially and the faculty-to-student ratio. Burton’s fund drive inspired alumnae to come back to the college more than ever before, increasing their representation on the board of trustees.

Smith had a much stronger start than Barnard. It had solid direction from the start, and it worked in collaboration with the other women’s college that were established at the time (Vassar, Wellesley, etc.). Smith didn’t have a female president until 1975, when Jill Ker Conway became president, which is an interesting fact for a women’s college (Elizabeth Cutter Morrow was an interim president in 1939, but I don’t think that is sufficient to count her as a last female leader).