

The Myth of Smith

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Late at night, when most of the students are asleep, the dorm lounge might seem to be an ideal place for some undisturbed studying--unless you happen to live in Smith Hall. Legend has it that the oldest dormitory on campus is haunted.

Stories of hearing footsteps in the attic and seeing a pretty young woman appear and then disappear have been around for generations. A female apparition roaming the halls of Smith would be in keeping with the origins of the dorm, which was built specifically for

women students. Before it opened in 1908, there were no facilities on campus for housing students. Those who could not commute from home were left to their own devices to find a place to live.

In 1895, after a bill to fund a women's dormitory was vetoed by the governor, the college refitted Benjamin Thompson's house for women students. Unfortunately, the house burned down in 1897. About this time, a philanthropist moved to town. Hamilton Smith Jr. had grown up in Durham with his grandfather, Judge Valentine Smith, and his Aunt Mary after his mother died when he was 5. A self-taught engineer, Smith became both the foremost authority on hydraulic mining and a wealthy man. He and his wife, the former Alice Congreve, moved back to Durham, bought a modest house on Main Street and transformed it into an opulent summer home called Red Tower, which still stands today.

Smith immediately gave \$10,000 to Durham's new college for scholarships in honor of his grandfather. He was planning to build a new public library when, on July 4, 1900, he suffered a fatal heart attack while boating on the Oyster River. He was 59.

A \$10,000 legacy in his will paid for the library, and Alice pledged another \$10,000 towards a dorm for women. With state appropriations, enough money finally was available.

The new building had rooms for 32 girls. All women students who did not live at home were required to live in Smith Hall, where rents ranged from \$1.25 to \$2 a week.

(Male students were still on their own. The college did what it could to help them meet expenses by giving them jobs on campus. There was one job, however, that was strictly off-limits--the janitor of Smith Hall.)

Over the decades, the building has been expanded and renovated several times, but it remains the smallest dorm on campus. In 1983, Smith Hall acquired an International Living theme. Currently, one third of the residents are from abroad. Its annual international fiesta, which will turn 25 this spring, attracts large crowds with music, dancing and food.

As for the ghost, well . . . perhaps after 100 years, a Smithie spirit is still going strong.

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