



coeducation @ 40

A BRIEF
HISTORY
of TWO
LEGACIES
and ONE
FUTURE

by MEGAN TADY





Nixon was president. The Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement, and women's lib were calling for societal shifts. The iconic Ed Sullivan Show was cancelled after a 23-year run. The public, the times, were demanding something different.

It was a difficult moment to be a prep school; many were struggling under tough economic times and an "old guard" persona.

In Western Massachusetts, two boarding schools—one girls school and one boys—decided to link arms. After 47 years as an all-female institution and 130 years as an all-male one, the Northampton School for Girls (NSFG) and Williston Academy merged. In the fall of 1971, The Williston Northampton School admitted 143 girls, 63 of whom came from NSFG.

"Both economic and social times were changing in the United States," said Charlotte Heavens Bruins '47, "and it seemed both Williston Academy and Northampton School for Girls were ready for that change."

Four decades later, The Williston Northampton School is a thriving coed boarding and day school. But the 40th anniversary of the merger offers a moment to reflect on both the triumphs and the pitfalls of two schools and two worlds colliding. As seamless

as coeducation now appears, the first years were tumultuous, chaotic, and exciting—painful for some, and liberating for others.

"They were brave and courageous decisions—motivated by necessity and the dominos of the culture falling—but they were monumental decisions nonetheless," said Head of School Bob Hill. "There's no way it could have been completely smooth. Those were tectonic plates shifting."

BROTHER and SISTER SCHOOLS

In truth, the merger was taking shape well before 1971, with negotiations quietly happening among the Boards of Trustees at both schools. When NSFG's founders, Dorothy Bement and Sarah Whitaker, retired in 1962, questions about the school's future emerged. Williston Academy was feeling economic pressure, and the move to coeducation seemed inevitable.

Williston Academy and NSFG had nurtured a special relationship over the

years, coordinating programming since the 1930s, including dances, theater, and singing groups.

"There was a strong feeling, even if it was never official, that we were brother and sister schools," said Richard Teller '70, Williston Northampton's archivist.

Still, the announcement of the merger was met with varying degrees of enthusiasm. Williston Academy alumnus Glenn "Swanee" Swanson '64 taught history at the Academy for three years pre-merger, and continues to teach at Williston Northampton today. "A lot of people had some apprehension," he said. "How do you deal with girls? How do you deal with some of the social tensions that are going to happen on campus and in the classroom?" There were faculty murmurings that the NSFG girls wouldn't keep up with the boys in academics. And in several editorials in NSFG's *Pegasus* newspaper, students wondered if their school would be swallowed up by the "Big Bad Willies."

Their concerns were penned in a letter to the editor in October, 1970:



*"There was a **strong feeling**, even if it was never official, that we were **brother and sister** schools."*

"What kind of meals are we going to get? Will we be deprived of our privacy? Will we be uneasy with boys in the class? Will we have bells? What about our traditions?"

TO DO NSFG PROUD

Many of both institutions' greatest fears dissipated in the first few months of the merger. The boys still studied; the girls had privacy and eased into life with testosterone-filled classrooms. But there was still jostling as students figured out their roles in the new school.

Sheila Fisher '72 was certain she would be the editor of the school newspaper her senior year. Then the schools merged, and suddenly her school newspaper was *The Willistonian*, and a boy was slated for the position. In the end, she was named coeditor along with her male counterpart, but she recalls that one of the early struggles of the merger was fighting for female parity.

"In certain areas, there was the assumption that NSFG was being absorbed into Williston, and there had been leadership

positions already allotted to the boys at Williston," Fisher said.

An exceptional student, Fisher became Williston Northampton's first valedictorian. "When I got to Williston, I felt like I had to do NSFG proud, and I also had to prove to these guys that the girls were every bit as smart and every bit as capable," she said.

Girls also vied for equality in athletics. Williston Northampton was still working out the kinks by the time Mary Conant '73 arrived as a freshman. Conant recalls that the girls still didn't have Williston Northampton blue and gold athletic uniforms, but had to wear NSFG green and white uniforms. They rarely had professional umpires to call their softball games and the girls' locker room was small and ill equipped.

A GOOD TIME TO BE YOUNG

Alumni recount the early years of the merger as an electric time. Daily chapel was out, and with it a strict dress code. Day students flooded the school. The arts program blossomed, and the theater program

flourished. New ideas were discussed and debated. There were boys in the classroom! There were girls in the classroom! People fell in love. Gil Timm '72 met new classmate Trili Goodrich '72 at a Halloween dance. The two eventually married.

People also "fell" into the school pool, fully unclothed. "First year of the merger, a bunch of girls and boys [went into the] swimming pool and skinny dipped," recalls retired faculty member Alan Shaler. "The problem was, we looked through the rule-book and there was no rule against this. But we had to do something about it. Finally somebody came up with it: 'swimming without a lifeguard.' They got 'em on that."

Across the nation, the times were changing. Along with that came a push for coeducation. Yale went coed. Harvard, Princeton, and Trinity, too. Title IX was passed and the Equal Rights Amendment was proposed.

"I did feel like, the very first day in September, there was something very exciting going on, and I loved it from the split second I stepped foot on campus," said Judy Fisher '73.



Tony Spagnola '72 also felt a new burst of creative energy on campus, and he attributes this to the girls. The arts became a viable part of the curriculum, not just an after-thought. "Guys were doing ceramics, that alone would've never happened," Spagnola said. "It was a major, major change to the direction of where the school was going."

The food improved, too: "All of a sudden, there was a salad bar, which is like saying 'scotch tape' now," Spagnola said. "Back then, there was no such animal."

ADMINISTRATIVE SHIFTS

The ideals of a "proper boarding school" were slipping away, and the faculty and administration faced the need to create a new school identity. French teacher Kendrick Heath '57, who taught at both Williston Academy and NSFG, remembers the merger as chaotic and volatile. "We were sort of flying by the seat of our pants," he said.

Teachers found themselves under dual leadership. Headmasters from both schools—Phillips Stevens of Williston Academy, and Nathan Fuller of NSFG—were simultaneously steering the ship. With different administrative philosophies, the transition was less than smooth.

"We had two headmasters and I always felt a little odd about that," Timm said. "I wasn't sure who was running the school and I wasn't even sure what all the rules were. They sort of combined schools and it felt like we were trying to throw it all together and see what sticks."

Chuck Tauck '72 said that although he "had fun dancing on the edge of the rules" senior year, his tenure on Williston Northampton's Board of Trustees as an adult gave him new sympathy for the struggles the administration faced during the merger.

"Looking back through the glasses I now wear from being on the board, this was probably, from an administrative and faculty standpoint, a complete nightmare," Tauck said.

Headmasters Stevens and Fuller both resigned after the first year of the merger.

Stevens wrote in his letter of resignation: "The merger, while difficult, has been a good thing for the school. I would make the same decision again to merge."

The tumult continued into 1972 as the school labored on. In 1973, Bob Ward, the dean of students at Amherst College, took the post, bringing with him a sense of calm. "[Ward] settled the ship down," said Ray Brown '55, now a retired math and science teacher.

"And once we got this whole thing administratively straightened out," Heath said. "It went really smoothly. I found it a tremendously exciting time."

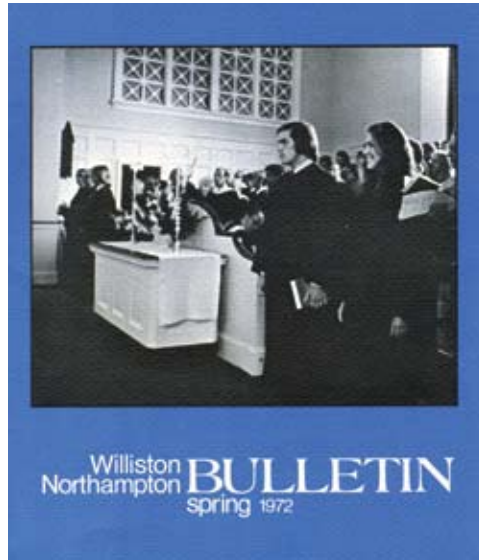
COMBINING LEGACIES

Dorothy Bement and Sarah Whitaker forged their school at a time when education options for women were minimal. They opened their doors in 1924 to a single student, and soon were purchasing additional buildings to house, teach, and feed the girls. The pride in the school was enormous, and women found NSFG a haven for their dreams and aspirations. It wasn't just nostalgia that made the merger difficult; NSFG was home.

"It was as if as soon as you go off to college, your parents decide to sell your family

"Two schools, each with distinguished reputations, are now one. We can take justifiable pride in the separate histories of both schools, but we can express even greater confidence in the present vigor and future strength of our school."





home and expect that this [new] place you've never lived in is going to be your home," Sheila Fisher said. "Well, it's not."

Although Fisher enjoyed her senior year at Williston Northampton, the move was, and remained, painful for her and her classmates. Until she returned to campus in 2012 to deliver a speech at the Cum Laude induction ceremony, she hadn't set foot on the merged campus in 38 years.

Fisher isn't alone. NSFG alumnae who graduated before the merger don't necessarily see Williston Northampton as their campus, yet they now have no other physical campus to return to. They also fear that the legacy of their school will be lost.

A handful of NSFG traditions were carried over in the merger, including the Sarah B. Whitaker Award, the "White Blazer," which recognizes "the young woman who has distinguished herself with the greatest contributions to the academic, athletic and community life of the school while exhibiting exemplary leadership and integrity." The Angelus, a large bell that was the centerpiece of NSFG ceremonies, was recently recovered and has been installed in a garden on campus. Yet 40 years after the merger, some NSFG alumnae still call for more recognition.

Much of the dismay stems from the merged school's name. In written references, it is 'Williston Northampton,' paying tribute to both schools' pasts. Yet in conversation, people often refer to the

merged school as 'Williston,' leaving NSFG alumnae feeling disenfranchised. "It's kind of an expunging of the name," Fisher said.

Some Williston Academy alumni also pine for their alma mater. "I was disappointed because we had to change our name and I felt like we should still be 'Williston Academy,'" Brown said. The boys also lost many of their traditional school songs, which were replaced with gender-neutral lyrics.

Teller offers a practical reality to paying homage to NSFG. "We are not a campus of monuments," he said. "Our two pieces of public sculpture are a lion of very dubious origins, and a statue of Sir John Falstaff, a fictional character and a notorious corrupter of youth."

"There are schools where you can't go around a corner without bumping into some dead guy in bronze. That's never been us."

TWO BECOME ONE

In his initial address to the school in 1973, Bob Ward said, "Two schools, each with distinguished reputations, are now one. We can take justifiable pride in the separate histories of both schools, but we can express even greater confidence in the present vigor and future strength of our school."

"I'm not saying that the transition was seamless, but looking at the school from

this present moment, it looks fantastic," Fisher said. "I don't think it's a merged entity anymore. It's a single entity."

The question of gender equality on campus now seems antiquated. The male to female ratio is nearly equal, and girls assume many of the leadership positions on campus, including roles in student government, on the school's publications, and in the school's many clubs.

Four decades later, Williston Northampton is a unified institution. Even though coeducation is now taken for granted, Bob Hill says the anniversary of the merger nudges students to appreciate the people who came before them.

"The women from NSFG were pioneers in education, as were their heads of school and founders," Hill said. "There is a courage and pioneering spirit to the very essence of NSFG, which I think is a timeless message for both boys and girls at The Williston Northampton School."

The anniversary of the merger is allowing both Williston Academy and NSFG alumni to take stock of the past, and reflect on the present.

"It makes me proud of the way that the young women who went through that first year made it through," Fisher said. "And it makes me proud of the school to be honest, that it's come out the other side in such a healthy way."



A CHAT *with* SUE BARNETT

BY EMILY GOWDEY-BACKUS

Fresh out of college, there was no question in Sue Curry's mind that she wanted to work at a private boarding school. Having grown up on a boarding school campus, she loved the sense of community and equality among the faculty and staff. After interviewing at a few schools, Curry chose Northampton School

for Girls, "because I felt that same sense of community... it was a nice fit." In addition to serving as a dorm parent during her tenure at NSFG and Williston Northampton, Barnett taught social studies, psychology, and math. She also coached soccer, hockey, and softball. An institution in the history of Williston Northampton, Sue Curry Barnett was always a friendly face on campus and played an important role in the transition to the two schools becoming one.

Q WHAT WAS THE CULTURE OF NORTHAMPTON SCHOOL FOR GIRLS AT THE TIME YOU WERE WORKING THERE?

A It was a bunch of girls, so it was things like dancing to records, putting on little skits just spur of the moment, being out on the athletic fields with Frisbees. It was easy to walk into downtown Northampton, and some did that, but there was a lot more spontaneous activity on campus.



Q WHAT ARE YOUR FONDEST MEMORIES OF NSFG?

A The kids. I coached, I ran a dorm, I had PE classes. I'm still in touch with hundreds of them. I've seen them grow up, fail, pick themselves up again, succeed, raise families. That's what I loved from start to finish.

Q WHAT WAS THE EFFECT OF THE MERGER ON NSFG'S CULTURE?

A It was not easy for females coming into an all-male environment. I don't think that's

unique to Williston Northampton. I think any place where there is a merger and the female population is picked up and moved people would say the same thing. I think I felt it less than some of the kids and some of my peers. We were fighting to get back to the place we had been, but it turned out okay.

Q WHAT WERE PEOPLE CONCERNED ABOUT AS THEY THOUGHT ABOUT THE MERGER?

A In the areas I was working, girls feared that they were going to be second-class citizens. We have limited athletic fields. It rains. Who gets to play? That was an issue at first because the boys varsity teams would play, the girls varsity teams would be postponed or cancelled. I don't want to say it was horrible, it wasn't horrible. But it wasn't easy.

Q WHEN DID IT FEEL LIKE WILLISTON NORTHAMPTON EMERGED FROM THE TRANSITION?

A I think that the merger got its best shot once that sophomore class graduated because now there was no longer any student who had started at NSFG. I think it was easier with the kids than the faculty and administration.

Q DO YOU THINK ANYTHING WAS LOST GOING FROM A GIRLS SCHOOL AND A BOYS SCHOOL TO A COED SCHOOL?

A I think one of the things that was lost is a sense of 'oneness.' The guys who are cleaning your dorms are as important to you in some ways as the person who is teaching your physics class. And that's what made the real sense of community at NSFG; everybody had the same goals in the long run. Everybody wasn't doing the same job or the same thing but everybody had the same purpose.

Q WHAT DO YOU THINK WAS GAINED?

A More opportunities. Everywhere. More choice of classes, more options for athletics, and more space. NSFG didn't have anywhere near the diversity in student population. An important part of boarding school is the diversity; you get to meet so many people from different cultures. And I'm not sure that dealing with adversity is all that bad. It teaches you a lot.

Q WHEN YOU TALK TO ALUMNAE WITH WHOM YOU'RE STILL IN CONTACT, WHAT DO THEY BRING UP?

A The funniest stories are from the kids who lived in my dorm. One year I was living in French House and by study hall time there was absolute silence in the dorm. Every now and then a tennis ball would roll down the stairs in front of my apartment, bump bump bump bump bump. Now, you'd think that if I could hear a tennis ball, I could hear feet. So I would go out, pick up the tennis ball, and walk it upstairs. But once I got upstairs there wouldn't be a soul around. There started to be rumors amongst the girls that there was a ghost in French House.