



THIS SPECIAL PLACE

*Remarks made by Pleasant T. Rowland,
founder of the Inns of Aurora, at the ribbon-cutting ceremony
for the reopening of the Aurora Inn on May 29, 2003.*

THIS EVENING WE GATHER TO HONOR A SPECIAL PLACE

and to reflect on the power of place to mark us for life. That place is Aurora, called “village of constant dawn” by the Indians who lived here, drawn to it first, I suspect, for its physical attributes — for the high ridge that protects it on the east and rolls gently down to its slight but sheltering cove at the widest part of a deep and clear lake. Drawn to it for the beauty of its sunsets that blaze over the hills of the western horizon, and for the dawn that washes the morning sky with endless sweet light and the promise of a glorious day to come. Indian lore has it that the Finger Lakes resulted when the High Spirit laid his hand upon the earth in a final benediction of all he had created, blessing this place above all with natural beauty and bounty. All of us who have come here since are touched by the generosity of that creation.

The early settlers, who came at the end of the 18th century, cleared the gentle slopes for pastures and farm fields, but left the deep ravines heavily wooded and alive with streams and waterfalls. Close behind the farmers came the entrepreneurs, men of energy and vision who founded banks and newspapers, grist mills and mercantile stores, shipping lines and express companies to take the bounty of the farms and forests to cities far away from this stop on the Erie Canal. With them they brought the cultural aspirations of their time. Progressive thinkers, gifted architects, and diligent scholars with a reverence for the order and ideas of ancient Greece and Rome, they named our village “Aurora” after the Greek goddess of the dawn. Here they built fine homes and public buildings, law offices and a Masonic lodge, churches and schools, and a handsome inn to welcome weary travelers. And here they founded a college, but a college unlike most of its time, for it would educate women. Envisioned by Henry Wells and funded primarily by his good friend, Edwin Morgan, Wells College gave to Aurora one of its most distinguishing attributes and enduring legacies.

Over time, trains would displace the transport of goods along the Erie Canal, the county seat would be settled in nearby Auburn and Aurora’s entrepreneurial aspirations of commercial prosperity and prominence

dwindled. But for the next 150 years, women from all over our growing nation would be drawn to this tiny, gentle village to attend the college that flourished here. They found exactly what Henry Wells envisioned for them: “a college home,” a place of intellectual stimulation where they were taught by the college motto to share the riches of their experience in Aurora with the world beyond its rural boundaries.

Nearly a century after Wells was founded, I was one of those women who made my way to this small college and to this tiny village. The four years I spent here changed me forever. First, of course, in the obvious ways that college changes everyone, by opening my mind to new ideas and my life to new people. But in another, deeper way, my heart was touched by the timeless remove of this place, far from the hustle and bustle of the world beyond. Something in my soul craved its quiet beauty, the golden dappled shade of the ancient elms that arched over Main Street, the somnolent air of warm autumn afternoons as shadows fell across the broad lawns. The rosy brick buildings, some modest, some grand, that had stood so proud for so long, satisfied some inner need for roots that went deep into time. I loved the portraits that hung in the college of early deans and presidents, of founders and benefactors whose sober faces reminded me of the long chain of caring people who had lived their lives here, who held high aspirations for this place and for those who would come here. And “here” was not just the college, but the village too, for the two have always been inextricably linked in my mind and heart — Wells and Aurora, Aurora and Wells. Reminders of the values and traditions of another, more tender time.

When I left Aurora in 1962, I was eager to go into the world beyond, anxious to take the gifts I had been given and put them to use. I was well prepared and thrived in the hurly-burly of that world — in journalism and education and commerce. Caught up in the adventures of life, I did not return to Aurora for decades. It was a piece of my past tucked safely away, I thought. But that was before I realized how much a part of me that past was, how deep in my consciousness this place and all it represented had been driven.

When I came back nearly twenty-five years after graduating, my heart quickened unexpectedly when I saw from the hilltop south of town, the red bell tower of Wells break through the canopy of trees. As I descended into the village, I knew that I had come home again. Here was a place seemingly unchanged, redolent with memories of my own past days in Aurora. But now I was more deeply moved by an awareness of its long history and had a greater appreciation of the values and wisdom, the taste and judgment of its early founders and settlers. It seemed to me then that if God's glory was expressed in the natural beauty of Aurora, man's glory was expressed in its handsome old buildings, the living legacy of a gracious past, a place of gentility, rare in the world as I had come to know it. Aurora was a very special place, indeed — a treasure to protect.

The journey from that moment to this one spanned 15 years, but throughout, my love of this place, its history and traditions, its beauty and bounty has remained unchanged. Perhaps knowing all of this will help you understand why I have given this gift of restoration to Aurora and to Wells.

Forty-five years ago, I came here seeking an education of the mind. I left with an education of the heart. And this gift to Wells, to Aurora, to all of you, and to future generations comes from my heart.

It is given in gratitude for the settlers of this village and the founders of this college—the ancestors of Aurora who bequeathed us all such a rich legacy. It has been my privilege, my joy, and my pride to restore the glory of this most special place in their honor.

Pleasant T. Rowland

is an alumna of Wells College, noted educator, author of early childhood literacy programs, and founder of American Girl. Pleasant has restored more than ten historic properties in Aurora since 2001, many of which today comprise the Inns of Aurora.