

Henry Suckley: loving son, devoted brother, and honorable servant for his country

by Edward J. Sullivan Ed.D.

NOTE: The following is abridged from a set of three articles appearing in the March, May, and June 2023 issues of *Living Rhinebeck*.

Imagine your life if you were born in 1887, raised in the splendor of a Victorian estate overlooking the majestic Hudson River with views of the picturesque Catskill Mountains, were educated in prestigious private schools in Europe and the United States, and met a tragic death while stationed in Koritza, Albania during World War I. If this was your life, you may have had beginnings comparable to those of Henry Eglinton Montgomery Suckley.

Henry Suckley was an older brother of Daisy (nickname of Margaret). Daisy, perhaps the best known of the seven Suckley children, is often referred to as a 'close confidant' or companion of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. While volumes have been written about Daisy, little is known about Henry's abbreviated life.

FAMILY BACKGROUND

Henry's parents married in 1884. Seven children were issues of this marriage. Henry Eglinton Montgomery Suckley (1887-1917) was the second child born to Robert Bowne Suckley and Elizabeth Philips Montgomery Suckley. He was one of four boys and three daughters (including a set of twins) in the Suckley clan.

HENRY'S EARLY EDUCATION

Henry's early education was informal although a Rhinebeck one-room school was within walking distance of Wilderstein. Had Henry enrolled in the Rhinebeck school, he would likely have been assigned to Morton School District 1 at the junction of Morton and Mill roads.

There is an absence of documents attesting to Henry's early studies provided by family and tutors. There are accounts of Henry's childhood bout with scarlet fever, attending baseball games with his father, bicycling with his father, and enjoying the re-location of the Suckley family for a decade in Switzerland (1897-1907) with its hardy exposure to tennis, skiing, climbing, and bicycling. For the first few years abroad, Henry was tutored in academics and violin playing.

Books were a paramount source of Henry's learning in his formative years judging from the variety of genres and topics in his collection of books maintained at the Wilderstein Historic Site. A sampling of books includes:

- *Martin Rattler* by R. M. Ballentyne (fictional account of Brazilian lords)
- *Book of Common Prayer* by Anonymous (prayers and hymns)
- *The Sailor Boy* by Oliver Optic (tale of the Civil War and the navy)
- *Auction in Ten Lessons* by Grace C. Montgomery (strategies for playing bridge)
- *The Man from Glengarry: A Tale of the Ottawa* by Ralph Connor (log drive in Canada)

HENRY'S FORMAL SCHOOLING

Henry's formal schooling began in 1900 when, at age 12, he was registered for a small boarding school called Institution de Jeunes Gens in La Villa Sous Lausanne, Switzerland. This school was dedicated to the physical and intellectual development of its students.

Henry's La Villa academic report cards indicate that he was an average student. His grades ranged from 7 to 9 on a 10-point scale. His strengths seemed to be in arithmetic, history,

geography, and science while lower grades were earned in English and French. Henry's conduct grades consistently scored as either an 8 or a 9.

While attending La Villa, Henry maintained correspondence with his mother fulfilling the school's expectation that students spend time each week writing to family. In his letters, Henry requests books, reports on his tennis matches, and notes that he is keeping up on violin lessons.

Taking advantage of his family being in Switzerland during his La Villa days, Henry asked his mother to bring him suspenders, shirt collars, and handkerchiefs the next time she visited. Henry also reminded her to bring a plum cake to help celebrate his birthday and money for his church offering.

In 1902, at age 15, Henry was sent to Allegmeine Musikschule Basel in Basel, Switzerland where he studied for a year with private tutors. This experience was followed by enrollment at the School of the United Brethren in Kröningfeld Germany "to prepare him for a good German high school or an American boarding school."

With direction from his father, Henry applied to Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire for his high school years. Henry's father wrote him stating, "It is my hope that you may be able to finish the courses there in two years, but possibly it may take three years." His father also advised Henry to take Latin and German. Henry was admitted to Phillips Exeter in 1904.

HENRY'S HIGH SCHOOL YEARS AT PHILLIPS EXETER ACADEMY

Henry returned to the United States for his high school education after completing his fundamental educational experience in Basel, Switzerland. He was enrolled at the Phillips Exeter Academy, a private boarding school, in Exeter, New Hampshire.

This exclusive school was founded in 1781 by Dr. John Phillips and his wife, Elizabeth. Their Deed of Gift instructed that Exeter's mission is "to regulate the tempers, to enlarge the minds, and form the morals of the youth committed to their care."

At the time of Henry's enrollment, there were approximately 500 students at Phillips Exeter Academy. Annual tuition was \$150, excluding room and board.

A review of Henry's report cards from the Academy indicates his strengths and areas of satisfactory scholarship. Henry's time at Exeter included continuing with tennis, attending dances, pledging a fraternity, and experiencing excursions to Boston. As Henry wrote within his first few months at the Academy, "We have a great deal of freedom compared to my other schools" Letters to the family spoke of the Exeter and Andover Academy rivalry and Henry's enthusiasm for their competitions.

Probably to alleviate his mother's concern, Henry wrote, "The meals are awfully good and we always have a good choice."

HENRY'S PROGRAM AT HARVARD UNIVERSITY

Upon graduating from Exeter Academy, Henry entered Harvard University (1906-1910). His plan of study would have been developed under the shadow of its long term-term president, Charles Eliot (1869-1909), Henry would have experienced entrance examinations, elective courses, and small classes.

Examples of Henry's scholarship and areas of study include history and literature. His final thesis for each of these subjects was handwritten into notebooks that contain an occasional cross-out, misspelling, or grammatical error. The following are examples of his areas of study:

History: In this 22-page thesis, Henry wrote about *The Gunpowder Plot* "to blow up the House of Lords on November 5, 1605...."

Literature: In his essay, *The Spectator and His Club*, Henry described how the Spectator formed a club to study the habits of people and proceeded to write about them in fictional and humorous essays directed at their morality.

Henry's studies also included courses in French, Spanish, and Greek. He continued with the violin and was elected to Harvard's renowned Hasty Pudding Club, formed as a "secret social club to cultivate friendship and patriotism."

In a 1907 response to a letter from his mother, Henry acknowledged her concern about excessive smoking. A few months later, Henry became more assertive in expressing a desire to have greater independence from his overbearing mother who was contemplating renting in the Boston area when he wrote, "I hardly see the necessity of your coming to Cambridge on my account as I have lived away at school since I was thirteen and ought to be able to take care of myself by this time."

Henry continued to state reasons why his mother should remain in New York instead of pursuing seasonal residence in the Boston area. His concern for his younger two brothers and three sisters to have more independence from their doting mother became even more direct in succeeding letters to his mother.

HENRY'S FINAL YEARS

After graduating from Harvard in June 1910, Henry visited a classmate at a New Hampshire game preserve, made a side trip to Canada, and traveled to Europe, particularly England and Italy. That winter he joined his father in Switzerland where he won trophies for bobsledding. In 1911, Henry was hired by a Boston financial institution where he specialized in investment bonds. This prepared him for later employment with a Wall Street banking institution. He left that latter position and traveled to other parts of the United States, with a focus on visiting Detroit.

After his wandering, Henry and his brothers, Robert and Arthur, secured a flat on 80th Street in New York City. The "boys were leading a casual, indulgent life – not too different from that of" their father when he was their age. While in New York City, the brothers enjoyed times at the Harvard Club and unspecified entertainment. Later that year, Henry hosted a series of social events at Wilderstein.

With World War I underway, Henry volunteered in August 1914 for ambulance service in France in the 'war to end all wars.' Henry was an ideal volunteer. He comprehended European ways of doing things. He was proficient in German and French and understood Italian well. His knowledge of how automobiles worked was first-rate. He was a mature twenty-eight-year-old with a commanding physical presence. Moreover, Henry Suckley had some military training; he belonged to a reserve regiment that had been in line to be sent to Mexico the previous year when the United States invaded that country to protect its business interests. Almost as important, he was intimate with people who could donate money and supplies.

Henry was assigned to the American Field Service Ambulance Corps stationed in France. In 1916, Henry appeared before the New York Stock Exchange to raise funds for additional ambulances for the European campaign. Prior to returning to his war-time duties, Henry made another trip to Detroit but did not inform anyone that he was becoming engaged. He returned to France in November 1916 whereupon he was assigned ambulance duties in Albania. He wrote his mother from France: "I will stay as long as I am really needed. You can expect, dear Mamma, to have your whole family with you as always...Everybody has to live his own life& cannot hope to remain peacefully at home always."

On March 18, 1917, Henry was struck by an enemy aerial bomb while performing his medical responsibilities and succumbed to resulting injuries within forty-eight hours.

Henry's life ended at age 30. His privileged life in an affluent family, although abbreviated, was fulfilled by his strong relationship with his father, love of a doting mother, enjoyable

occasions with siblings, the richness of times at Wilderstein, physical activities, scholarship at elite institutions, domestic and international travel, engagement to be married, and service to the country. Henry is buried at Koritza, Albania. A street in Koritza bears his name presumably in recognition of his work in the ambulance corps and his ability to acquire funds for 25 new ambulances during World War I.

After his death, letters to his father continued to arrive at Wilderstein. One letter “announced his engagement to Betty Miller, the girl he had been visiting in Detroit.”

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