

## Celestia Rice Colby (1827-1900)

Celestia Rice Colby was born on December 19, 1827 in Andover, Ohio. She was the fourth child born to Joel and Flavia (Bradley) Rice. She was named for an older sister, Celestia Resign, who died before she was born. Eighteen months after Celestia was born her mother gave birth to her only brother, John Bradley. Sadly, Celestia's mother passed away two months after her son was born. One year after Celestia's mother's death, her father married Evelina Johnson in November of 1830. Shortly after this marriage the family moved to the new and growing town of Cherry Valley, Ohio by 1832.<sup>1</sup>

Her father worked a variety of jobs and was something of an entrepreneur. At times he worked as a peddler (a person who travels around selling goods), a merchant, a farmer, and a speculator (possibly buying things to sell for higher prices later). He also owned a dairy farm and was so successful at this business that he opened a "second store" as well. The Rice family became one of the wealthiest families in the community.<sup>2</sup> Not only did the wealth and status of the Rice family grow, but the size of the family continued to grow as well. Joel and Evelina would have three children together; two sons and a daughter.

Much of what is known about Celestia comes from her diaries, letters, short stories, and other writings. From those writings it is evident that she did not have a very happy childhood mainly because of the early death of her mother and her father's subsequent remarriage. She did not have fond memories of her stepmother and rarely mentioned her younger brother (born shortly before her mother's death) whom she probably blamed for her mother's death. But education would bring a sense of happiness to an otherwise bleak childhood. She received initial schooling at one of the six common schools in Cherry Valley. Celestia continued on and received further schooling which was rare for children, especially girls, of this time period. In the early 1840s, Celestia attended a private seminary school, Grand River Institute, twenty miles northwest of her home. This institute first opened its doors to girls in 1840. The GRI "apparently admitted women on equal conditions with young men and course catalogs of the time period did not differentiate between classes for men and women." To attend the GRI students "had to be at least fourteen years old and furnish satisfactory testimonials that they possess a good moral character, and that they are sufficiently acquainted with elements of Orthography, Reading, Writing, English, Grammar, and Arithmetic to complete a four-year curriculum in either the English or Classical Department."<sup>3</sup>

It is most likely that her time spent at the GRI gave her a sense of independence and also instilled in her a passion for social issues such as slavery and women's rights.<sup>4</sup> In her later writings she would speak out against slavery and for women's' rights along with other social issues of the day. The community in which the GRI was located (Austinburg, OH), was a well-known station for the Underground Railroad. Celestia would have also been exposed to several leaders and teachers of the anti-slavery movement, possibly fueling her passions for rights in the future.<sup>5</sup> It cannot be determined how long she attended the GRI but following her education she taught school in the area during the mid to late 1840s. By the summer of 1847 Celestia's teaching days were over because she became engaged to Lewis Colby in August of that year.

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<sup>1</sup> Tina Brakebill. *Circumstances are Destiny* (Kent, Ohio: Kent State University Press, 2006) p. 6

<sup>2</sup> Brakebill, p.7

<sup>3</sup> Brakebill, p.11

<sup>4</sup> Brakebill, p.12

<sup>5</sup> Brakebill, p.12

Celestia knew Lewis and his family for much of her life. The Colby family had moved to Cherry Valley from New Hampshire in 1834 and worked as dairy farmers as well. One of Lewis' brothers was also a common school teacher at the same time Celestia was teaching so the families would have interacted with each other on many occasions.<sup>6</sup> Lewis and Celestia were married in July of 1848. They then moved in with Lewis's parents, David and Naomi Colby, where they lived until Lewis' parents died, (his mother being the last to die in 1863). Although it would seem that Celestia and Lewis's relationship began out of love, in later years discontent would arise. As Lewis traveled frequently, Celestia's longings for him dissipated and the nature of their marriage became questionable. This discontentment possibly arose early on as her life of working and schooling ended, her personal goals veered off path, and the ability to achieve outward happiness became all the more challenging. Her private writings revealed her dissatisfaction and loss of identity. She seemed to make a transformation from an independent woman to submissive wife.

In April of 1850, Celestia and Lewis were blessed with their first child, a son named Montie Plummer Colby, who they often just called Plummer. During her pregnancy Celestia experienced heavy emotional stress. She feared that her body would not withstand childbirth and she would die. This belief was not unfounded because her mother died shortly after the birth of Celestia's brother and many women of the time were prone to unfortunate experiences during pregnancy and childbirth. In addition to this fear, Celestia felt unprepared to become a mother as she did not have a significant example or female companion in her life to seek advice. Her worries were unfounded as she suffered no ill health after the birth of Plummer. He was born happy and healthy.

The year following the birth of Plummer was a pivotal one when the Ladies' Repository published her essay, "Flowers." This was the first time one of her essays had been published. Although this was a happy occasion, it also presented a developing struggle for Celestia between her family obligations and personal dreams. This is reflected in her writings referencing the editor's acceptance of her essay: "I had scarcely anticipated that the result would be so favorable, as I was hardly satisfied with the production when I sent it. Yet it was the best I could do under the circumstances, it being written with a babe in my arms, while one hand held the pen, the other was employed in soothing my little one to slumber and as mother of course the mind was divided between them both."<sup>7</sup>

In September of 1852 Colby gave birth to her second child, Vine Cynthia (named for the two friends who died years earlier). It seemed by this time Celestia had found a sense of well being and a balance between being a wife and mother but this happiness was short-lived. By November of 1853 tragedy struck when Colby's three year old son Plummer died of unknown causes. Despite her grief, Colby was pregnant with her third child, Branch Harris Colby, born in July 1854. She viewed this as an interruption in her mourning and did not view the child as a way to fill the void left by Plummer. During her pregnancy she wrote in her diary that she longed for her sweet "angel boy" to return to his "earthly home." After Branch's birth, she chastised herself in her diary that her grief for Plummer caused her not to see what a blessing in disguise the birth of Branch was.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Brakebill, p.22

<sup>7</sup> Brakebill, p.31

<sup>8</sup> Brakebill, p.35

Between the years of 1850 and 1854, Celestia gave birth to three children. With a growing family and the continued growth of the family's business, Celestia was forced to put aside her grief and focus on the needs of her family. As dairy farmers the Colby's earned a steady income. Throughout New England and the Ohio Valley, dairy farms were integral to the production of cheese. Often a laborious process, this work did not fit in with society's ideals of a delicate and refined woman. The work of a dairy farmer's wife seemed to be more significant than that of any other hand as they were responsible for the actual production of the cheese. It required constant attention with a timed and temperature regulated sequence. The work could become dangerous at times as many various vats and cutting tools were used. According to Celestia the process took years to learn. She was expected to work in a windowless cellar called "the cheese house" as part of the cheese making process. A dairywoman "spent large blocks of time, was a rather dim...close environment...in a basement or cellar location with low ceiling and no doors."<sup>9</sup> This caused her to urge farmers to recognize the intellectual side of women's expertise rather than expecting the women to work alone in a dark cellar. Due to little alone time and a demanding schedule and workload of a wife and mother, Celestia, like many women at the time was forced to write late at night or early in the morning. She would often daydream during the day of things to write but lose the passion by the time she would put pen to paper.<sup>10</sup> Celestia also felt that a "cultivated" mind would lead to an efficient housekeeper which meant a happier home. Although she defended the rights of women to "furnish their minds,"<sup>11</sup> she also knew that a woman's "first duty lay with the household."<sup>12</sup>

In June of 1856, Colby gave birth to June Rose, her second daughter. Colby also had a fifth child, likely named Thorn. Sadly, he was a stillborn and it is not exactly known when he was born. Celestia took great pride in her children and lived vicariously through their lives and activities, especially her daughter June Rose. She emphasized the importance of education "as a means of personal fulfillment and for her children to become productive citizens."<sup>13</sup> She wanted to form their habits and ideals. Despite emotional hardships, Colby succeeded in raising her children to become accomplished adults. Vine became a doctor and Branch became an employee of the St. Louis Sewer Dept. Colby's daughter Rose, her "pet," inherited her mother's love of literature and turned it into her life's work. Rose would eventually become Professor of Literature at Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois.<sup>14</sup>

During the years leading up to the Civil War, Celestia began writing for publications on temperance and anti-slavery as well as stories for and about children or women. One such journal she contributed to was *The Women's Journal*. This was a publication put out by Lucy Stone, a woman's suffragist, who Colby met while attending the GRI. Colby would often write "forcefully about the natural equality of all humankind and directly confronted subjects like slavery and women's rights."<sup>15</sup> She viewed slavery as an "inhuman institution,"<sup>16</sup> that destroyed families. Through her writing, Celestia beseeched white mothers "not to ignore the plight of those other mothers, whose hearts, though may beat beneath a sable skin, were as warm and pure

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<sup>9</sup> Brakebill, p.39

<sup>10</sup> Brakebill, p.37-41

<sup>11</sup> Brakebill, p.47

<sup>12</sup> Brakebill, p.47

<sup>13</sup> Brakebill, p.23

<sup>14</sup> "Celestia Rice Colby," Unknown Author

<sup>15</sup> Brakebill, p.XIV

<sup>16</sup> Brakebill, p.49

as their own.”<sup>17</sup> Celestia, although in strong opposition to the legality of slavery, never crossed the boundaries of female societal expectations. Her words also focused on themes such as home and family. For example, Colby wrote about the effects of an alcohol ridden house and the strife it caused local families. “Colby’s early arguments show that she used alcohol’s threat to the family to justify women’s active involvement.”<sup>18</sup> She wrote that it was a women’s “duty to use influence to stop alcohol’s entrance into the home.”<sup>19</sup> These essays led into her fight for women’s rights. She criticized the stereotype that women were weaker than their male counterparts. “She is stronger-not in the mere physical sense, and yet in the physical endurance, few men could bear the wear and tear, the constant tax upon the physical system, that is borne uncomplainingly by those who are called weak and delicate women.”<sup>20</sup> However her public and private life offered a paradox. Her inner life was one of womanly duty, of constant housekeeping. Her outer life of her publishing’s exemplified her conflict. Her private words of hopelessness and despair rivaled those of her passionate public words of a women’s right to experience life beyond their circumstances. Celestia may have missed the decades that revolved around women’s suffrage but she certainly was part of the foundation on which future generations would build upon. This included her daughter Rose, who beyond her distinguished professorial works at Illinois State University, devoted time to women’s rights.

Celestia certainly found an outlet in her essay writing but poetry and general letters to a “friend” also became a useful source in which to unload her private feelings. On marriage, she described the institution “as either a cup of blessing or a fountain of unmitigated woe.”<sup>21</sup> “She believed that a woman enters marriage with an ideal rather than a fact of what their loved one is truly.” These thoughts possibly reflect her relationship with Lewis and would lend credence to the reason of their eventual separation.<sup>22</sup>

In 1866, Celestia and her family moved to Freeport, Illinois. The ever modernization of farming and lack of steady business led to this change. They no longer engaged in dairy farming and lived in the city. Lewis wanted to find success in a different market. He operated his own business as a lightning rod salesman. Lewis must have been somewhat successful as the family employed a live-in housekeeper. All three of their children also attended public schools in Freeport (though up to this point June Rose had been home schooled.)

The family moved again just four years later when Vine entered the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor in June of 1870 just six months after the college altered its admission practice and began allowing women to attend the school.<sup>23</sup> She went on to graduate with a B.Ph. from the College of Literature, Arts and Science.<sup>24</sup> She and her husband Sidney Foster (whom she met and married while at the University of Michigan), went on to Medical School in Keokuk, Iowa and graduated with medical degrees in 1877. Unfortunately, Vine died at the age of twenty-five from a pelvic disease. Branch went on to attend the University of Michigan as well and graduated with a B.S. in 1877. He became an engineer and eventually became the U.S. Assistant Engineer with the Mississippi River Commission.<sup>25</sup> Once Rose finished at Ann Arbor

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<sup>17</sup> Brakebill, p.49

<sup>18</sup> Brakebill, p.50

<sup>19</sup> Brakebill, p.50

<sup>20</sup> Brakebill, p.159

<sup>21</sup> Brakebill, p.139

<sup>22</sup> Brakebill, p.159

<sup>23</sup> Brakebill, p.203

<sup>24</sup> Brakebill, p.204

<sup>25</sup> Brakebill, p.204

High School, she too graduated from the University of Michigan and was one of the first women to earn a Ph.D. Rose taught high school in Michigan and in Peoria, Illinois before being offered a position as a Professor of Literature at Illinois State Normal University in Normal, Illinois. While there, she had a successful career as a professor in English Literature and as Dean of Women. As their children migrated to other parts of the Midwest, so did Celestia and Lewis until they parted ways sometime between 1881 and 1883. It is unclear if they ever officially divorced.

With a new found independence, Celestia moved forward in her life. During the 1880s and 1890s she seemed happy and fulfilled. She filled her days with reading, writing, education, women's issues, and family. She wrote for publications throughout Michigan and Illinois. Unlike the past, she now had the opportunity to enjoy her passions and pursue her interests. She joined women's clubs like the Normal History Club. This club was formed in 1894 after Celestia moved to Normal, IL to live with her daughter Rose. The club was "dedicated to the proposition that women are created the intellectual equals with men; that they are not to be regulated to a lifetime of serving their husbands, rearing their children, and performing all the menial tasks related thereto while minds and spirits atrophy' that they have minds that are capable of the acquisition of knowledge, and have the ideas and initiative that can contribute to the quality of life in the community and beyond."<sup>26</sup>

After only living in Normal for about six years, Celestia Rice Colby died on July 28, 1900 at the home she shared with her daughter June Rose on West Mulberry Street in Normal, IL.<sup>27</sup> She had been ill for many months and her death was expected. At the time of her death, *The Pantagraph* remembered her as "a woman of remarkable attainments of mind. She was a hardworking student all her life, and her literary tastes were thoroughly cultivated. Her papers were among the most scholarly productions heard by the Normal History Club during its existence. Mrs. Colby was highly esteemed as a neighbor, and her death causes general regret."<sup>28</sup> She was buried at Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington, IL.

**For a more in depth examination of Celestia Rice Colby, see *Circumstances are Destiny*, by Tina Brakebill, available at the McLean County History Museum.**

By: Emily Swartz, 2010

Edited by: Candace Summers, 2010

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<sup>26</sup> Brakebill, p.214

<sup>27</sup> *Bloomington City Directory*, 1899

<sup>28</sup> Brakebill, p.219