

Mary Gridley (1818-1900)

Mary Enos Gridley was born in Onondaga Hollow, Onondaga County, New York on March 18, 1818. When she was a child her parents, William C. and Clarissa Barney Enos moved the family to Indiana and Louisiana before settling in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1830. When Mary was only eighteen years old, she married General Asahel (pronounced ASH-el) Gridley, a man eight years her senior and who would later become known as the richest man in Central Illinois. Mary and Asahel met when Asahel came out East on a purchasing trip (which he did twice a year), buying things on credit for his store back in Bloomington.¹ Their wedding was held in Pittsburgh on March 22, 1836. Soon after the wedding the young couple traveled back to Asahel's home in Bloomington.²

Asahel had come to Bloomington on October 8, 1831 from Casanovia, New York, five years before his marriage to Mary, with \$1,500 in his pocket and a desire to build a fortune. He found his fortune in the small frontier town which at that time had a population of only a few hundred people. It was here that he would open up his first business, a small general store.³

But the small undeveloped frontier town of Bloomington shocked Mary who was used to the comforts and conveniences of Eastern cities. Among the belongings she brought with her were a canary, a cane-bottomed chair, and other things that had never been seen in Bloomington before her arrival. She also brought her African-American maid, Rebecca Barnes,⁴ along to serve as a companion and domestic helper. In an 1899 interview with Madame Annette, a reporter for the *Daily Bulletin*, Mary claimed that Rebecca was the first African-American house servant in McLean County at the time.⁵

The Gridleys first stayed at the Caravansary Hotel and then boarded with the James Allin family for the first year of their marriage. Then Asahel bought Allin's home and remodeled the log cabin into a comfortable home for his wife and baby daughter Juliette who was born in 1837.⁶ Mary missed her family and home in Pittsburgh very much. In an 1899 interview with Madame Annette, a reporter for *The Daily Bulletin* newspaper in Bloomington, she recalled later in life that Asahel had "so impressed me with Bloomington's glories that I fondly anticipated getting into a perfect paradise. Well, I was disillusioned, I assure you... My home in Pittsburgh that I had so gladly left with General Gridley, seemed a veritable haven of beauty when I recalled it to my mind's eye, after I had reached here."⁷ She also stated that her first year in Bloomington was particularly hard for her in that she knew absolutely nothing about housekeeping and little more about cooking (and her maid knew little more than she). She recalled that they

¹ Alice McCarthy Schlenker, "The Resurrection of General Asahel Gridley," McLean County Museum of History Archives, 9

² Thomas Boslooper, "General Asahel Gridley of Bloomington," McLean County Museum of History Archives, 5

³ Herbert Hiatt. "General Asahel Gridley," 1958, McLean County Museum of History Archives, 3

⁴ Marriage record for Henry Wells and Rebecca Barnes, McLean County Marriages Index 1831-1892

⁵ Untitled article, *The Daily Bulletin*, November 22, 1900, McLean County Museum of History Archives; Madame Annette. "A Queenly Woman, An Interview with the Venerable Mrs. A.M. Gridley," *The Daily Bulletin*, January 26, 1899

⁶ Boslooper, 6

⁷ Annette, "A Queenly Woman"

did not have a stove in their first home and had to rely on “iron skillets and reflectors” to cook all of their food.⁸ However, as she became accustomed to her surroundings she began to love and appreciate her new home and neighbors.

Things took a turn for the worse for the Gridley family in 1837. Because of the Land Panic of 1837, Asahel’s tenants and business clients were unable to pay back their debts. He even went so far as to place an ad in the *Bloomington Observer and McLean County Advocate* (the local weekly newspaper at the time) which offered a \$25 reward to any person who would “cause all persons indebted to [him] by note or otherwise to pay the same when due.”⁹ Unfortunately Asahel, like many others in Bloomington, went bankrupt by 1842. Because of this his family was forced to survive by eating corn bread and the occasional strip of old bacon.¹⁰ Shortly thereafter he was able to recover his own bankrupted assets at a very low price by borrowing money from his brother. He was then able to collect both principal and interest on the unpaid bills and “thus secured himself a good new start in the world.”¹¹

Asahel was involved in a variety of careers including land speculator, local politician, and lawyer. In 1841 he was elected State Representative and then State Senator in 1850. While a senator he was able to use his business connections to secure the Illinois Central Railroad to build its route through Bloomington enabling McLean County to grow large and prosperous.¹² He founded one of earliest banks in Bloomington known as the McLean County Bank in 1853. He also bought the floundering Bloomington Gas Light and Coke Company around 1860 and did much to expand the quality and amount of gas service to residents of Bloomington.¹³ He owned a plethora of businesses and twenty-six farms in addition to traveling the law circuits with Abraham Lincoln and David Davis in the 1840s. He developed a close personal relationship with Abraham Lincoln and may even have been partly responsible along with Jesse Fell for Lincoln’s nomination as the Republican candidate at the 1860 Presidential Convention in Chicago.

Due to Asahel’s shrewd business sense and the fact that he was able to completely recover from the bankruptcy he suffered from seventeen years prior, he was able to begin building a new home for the family in 1859. By this time he was recognized as the first millionaire in McLean County and his new house would reflect that wealth. This elegant mansion called “The Oaks” (located at 301 E. Grove Street), was completed in 1860. Designed in the Italianate style,¹⁴ the mansion was “constructed of cream colored bricks imported from Milwaukee with French windows along the front of the residence that opened out onto a stone patio roofed over with lacy ironwork. Each window and door

⁸ Annette, “A Queenly Woman.”

⁹ Boslooper, 12

¹⁰ Schlenker, 10

¹¹ Hiatt, 5

¹² Hiatt, 6

¹³ *The History of McLean County, Illinois, Illustrated*. (Chicago: Wm. LeBaron, Jr. and Co., 1879) 397-398

¹⁴ The Italianate style of architecture featured a low pitched roof, bracketed cornices, round and segmented arched windows with decorative headers, and recessed entrances. It was a very popular architectural style for homes in the 1840s to 1880s in the United States; Michael Freimann. *Standing on the Corner: A tour of the architecture of downtown Bloomington*. (Bloomington: McLean County Historical Society, 1999) 22

was surmounted by a graceful arched stone header.”¹⁵ When the Gridley’s traveled overseas they would bring back grandiose tapestries, statues, and paintings said to have been painted by Michelangelo and Le Brun.¹⁶ Mary also recalled later in life that her new home was full of “show pieces” of furniture including the first rocking chair “ever brought to the city, the first marble topped table, and the first grand piano” too. Though she admitted that Dr. Herman Schroeder had the first “full” grand piano in the city.¹⁷ A large Italian fountain stood in the front yard between the door and the house. The yard also had broad drives and was completely surrounded by an iron fence. The house was completed at a cost of \$40,000 (which would be worth \$1.1 million in 2012).¹⁸ It was the centerpiece of Bloomington’s elite society and the location of many extravagant gatherings throughout the Gridleys’ lives including the weddings of the Gridley daughters, Juliette and Mary, both of whom were later divorced. However, many in Bloomington saw “The Oaks” as just another way that Mary Gridley was showing off her wealth and achievement and many people began to resent her for it. It was said that Gridley once invited Abraham Lincoln, who was in town for a political rally for the upcoming presidential election of 1860, to see “The Oaks.” Gridley proudly gave Lincoln a tour of the mansion’s marvelously decorated interior. After the tour, Lincoln stated: “Gridley, do you want everyone to hate you?”¹⁹

Yet despite the Gridleys’ extensive wealth and social prestige their marriage was not a particularly happy one. Although Asahel was very ambitious and charismatic, he was also known for his fierce temper. It is said that he would get drunk and stand on street corners yelling insults at other prominent members of Bloomington society. His hot temper and foul mouth got him in some trouble once when a friend of his, William Flagg, became fed up with his mouth and sued him for slander. Asahel retained Lincoln to defend him in this case and Lincoln won the case through the simple defense of stating an obvious fact to anyone who knew Gridley. Lincoln stated that “if anyone else had said such things, he would be guilty of slander, but everybody knows that General Gridley talks that way all the time.”²⁰

Although Lincoln proved to be a faithful friend to Asahel, the Gridleys found themselves more and more alienated by other society members (most notably David and Sarah Davis, who were bitter political and social rivals of the Gridleys), partially because of Asahel’s temper and partly because of Mary’s conspicuous shows of wealth which may have erected barriers between her and other slightly less wealthy society members. Later in her life Mary recounted to Madame Annette that Judge David Davis and his wife Sarah had borrowed her cut-glass high stemmed champagne glasses—“not to use as receptacles for the effervescent beverage...but for vases of flowers to decorate their home in honor of guests.”²¹ This may have been a jab at the Davis’ in that she felt they were not as high class as the Gridleys. Yet other reports indicate that Mary was actually quite social. Her confidante was Maria Dawson Cheney Paist, a very friendly woman who Mary spoke kindly of later in her life. Maria, Mary, and other ladies of the time took it

¹⁵ Boslooper, 14

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Annette, “A Queenly Woman.”

¹⁸ Boslooper, 14

¹⁹ Schlenker, 14

²⁰ Schlenker, 4

²¹ Annette, “A Queenly Woman.”

upon themselves to entertain the lawyers on the circuit when they stopped in Bloomington.²² However Mary was never mentioned in the memoirs of Mrs. Paist, Sarah Withers, or Judith Bradner, all prominent society ladies at the time.

And Asahel's temper was not limited to those in society. Mary was often the focus of that temper as well. It is said that he once chased Mary out of "The Oaks" on a snowy winter evening in only a nightgown after one of their arguments.²³ Asahel's schedule may also have been difficult for Mary to live with. During the time that Asahel was serving as a state senator, his job required him to be in Springfield two days a week and Bloomington the other four. He would have no problem leaving Springfield on his horse, riding a distance of 60 miles through the night, and arriving in Bloomington ready to start work the next morning. He did this twice a week.²⁴

Out of their ten children, only four (Juliette, Albert, Mary, and Edward) survived to adulthood. Five of their children died in infancy. Their son Charlie was nine years old when he fatally shot himself with a gun given to him by Asahel. Charlie later died of a lockjaw infection from the wound.²⁵ Lockjaw (today known as tetanus), is a serious bacterial infection that affects the muscles and nerves. The infection begins with muscle stiffness, usually in the neck and jaw area, and progresses to other areas of the body. Death was often the result due to severe breathing difficulties or heart problems.²⁶ Perhaps the psychological guilt of this incident affected Asahel deeply for he was also reported as blaming Mary for smothering with a pillow the five children who died in infancy as well as making other accusations against her.²⁷

But Mary was a strong-willed woman and found ways to get back at Asahel for his nasty temper. During the Presidential Campaign in October of 1860, two political rallies were held in Bloomington. Stephen Douglas and Governor Thomas Corwin, (former governor of Ohio), were in town to speak at these rallies. Asahel, being a staunch supporter of the Republican Party, escorted Gov. Corwin to the Republican rally being held across town. At the same time, Mary put a Douglas flag on her husband's carriage and escorted Douglas to town to attend the Democratic rally. Mary is known to have preferred Lincoln over Douglas so chances are that she did this to undermine her husband which was a very brave and daring thing to do at the time. Later that month, Judge David Davis wrote to his wife Sarah and told her that he was ashamed of Mrs. Gridley's behavior. He stated that "a wife, making her husband, a laughing stock bringing him into public ridicule, and hurting his feelings in public, needs the chastisement that "Lord Hale" thought was right under certain circumstances. A great many men would not live with her another day after such an impropriety."²⁸

Asahel died on January 25, 1881 of exhaustion and a lung ailment aggravated by fighting a fire at his bank. Although he died in peace with his family around him, a

²² Annette, "A Queenly Woman."

²³ Schlenker, 16

²⁴ Schlenker, 14; Boslooper, 18

²⁵ Boslooper, 19

²⁶ "Tetanus," Department of Health, Information for a healthy New York, http://www.health.ny.gov/diseases/communicable/tetanus/fact_sheet.htm, (Date accessed February 20, 2014).

²⁷ Schlenker, 16

²⁸ Willard L. King. *Lincoln's Manager: David Davis*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960) 160 and Letter from David Davis to Sarah Davis, October 30, 1860 (Illinois Historic Preservation Agency)

family story claims that Mary refused to provide him with more warm clothing when his extremities began to get cold saying that it would be too much effort for her to wash the extra clothing. His funeral was a lavish event held at “The Oaks” with thousands in attendance. Yet Mary insisted that her husband’s casket be carried out the rear door instead of the front door because her “rugs had already taken enough punishment.”²⁹ He was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery in Bloomington next to several of his children that had preceded him in death.

But after Asahel’s death, their surviving children became embroiled in a series of dramatic events that were displayed in the pages of *The Daily Pantagraph* in the same style as today’s tabloids. When his eldest daughter Juliette found out that her father’s will had left her only a fraction of the amount her siblings received, she was furious. Calling her father “the dictator of this city for 40 years,” she went on a verbal rampage, using rather vivid narrative to relate all kinds of unsavory (and probably falsified) things about her family.³⁰ Juliette also said that she felt the will was made while her father “was in a frenzied and excitable state,” and that those around her father were responsible for the creation of this unfair will.³¹ She then stormed into a lawyer’s office contesting the will. The court ruled against her in 1883 and Juliette returned to Europe with her second husband, Count Ernest Schoenrock of Switzerland. However, before she returned to Europe it was said that she went to her father’s grave in Evergreen Cemetery and stomped on it saying “Old Grid! This is just where you ought to be!”³²

Sadness struck Mary yet again in 1895 when her son Albert committed suicide. After marrying a divorced woman, Mrs. Elizabeth Temples (which was reprinted in the newspapers and was quiet scandalous) and several failed business ventures, he moved his family to Batavia, Illinois—but tragedy followed them there as well. One of their children died in infancy while another was killed in an accident. Albert and Elizabeth had no other children. These combined tragedies and failures caused him to become an alcoholic and while in New Orleans in 1895, he walked into a pawnshop, picked up a gun, and shot himself in the head.³³

Six months after that Mary’s other son Edward married Ora Walton in a lavish ceremony attended by top members of society. But right next to *The Daily Pantagraph*’s description of the festivities there was an article announcing a lawsuit against Edward Gridley for “breach of promise.” Apparently, before marrying Ora, Edward had been engaged to Miss Vina Farley and had even given her a gold bracelet with a jewel inside. The jewel could only be unlocked on their wedding day but Edward still had the key when he abandoned Vina to marry Ora. Vina Farley planned to sue him for damage to her reputation but the suit never went to court.³⁴

Daughter Mary also divorced her husband, Frederick Bell, and lived with her mother until her mother’s death. They traveled around Europe several times. But after Mary Gridley died, Mary Bell decided to travel to Europe on her own and packed several trunks filled with gorgeous gowns to wear to European social balls. However, when the

²⁹ Boslooper, 22-23

³⁰ Schlenker, 25

³¹ Hiatt, 9

³² Schlenker, 26

³³ Schlenker, 26-27

³⁴ Schlenker, 25-26

ship was unloading its cargo Mary's trunk fell into the water and all the gowns were ruined. This caused Mary to suffer a nervous breakdown and she spent the next twenty years of her life in a sanitarium in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Finally her doctor passed away and the new doctor allowed her to return to normal life. The rest of her life was rather ordinary and she was remembered for being charming but slightly high-strung.³⁵

After a long and tumultuous life, Mary Gridley died of heart and kidney trouble on November 22, 1900 in the Auditorium Hotel in Chicago. She had a large but simple funeral at St. Matthew's Episcopal Church where she had faithfully attended services. Her obituary in *The Daily Pantagraph* said that "her death removes one of the most prominent ladies of the city and there will be genuine sorrow in the hearts of all who knew her and appreciated her and her total worth."³⁶ Mary was buried in Evergreen Memorial Cemetery next to her husband and children.

By: Laurie Peterson, 2008

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³⁵ Schlenker, 28

³⁶ "Spirit Wings Flight, Mrs. A. Gridley Breathes Her Last in Chicago This Morning," *The Daily Pantagraph*, November 22, 1900