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A Biography of Ellen McAlphin

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A BIOGRAPHY OF

ELLEN MCALPIN

OEE MULLIS

HISTORY 450

DR. WARLICK

TO FRANK

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ABSTRACT

Ellen McAlpin, daughter of Angus and Sarah Rucker McAlpin was born on August 14, 1856 at the Hermitage Plantation along the Savannah River. She grew to be a charitable person, giving of herself to others. This was seen in her work with the Savannah Port Society where she organized and served as President of the Port Sewing Society for fifty-four years. She was instrumental in the formation of the local chapter of the YWCA and served as its first President for more than five years, after which she was made honorary President for life. She was an active member of the Independent Presbyterian Church where she served in the Women's Auxiliary and the Ladies Foreign Mission Society.

FAMILY BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

Ellen McAlpin was born on August 14, 1856 on the Hermitage Plantation. She was the eldest child of Angus and Sarah Rucker McAlpin. Her father, Angus, was the son of Henry and Ellen McInnes McAlpin and her mother, Sarah, was the daughter of Tinsley W. Rucker of Elbert County and great grand-daughter of Joseph Rucker of the Cedar Grove Plantation.¹

Ellen's family background is most important in establishing her standing in history. Her grandfather, Henry McAlpin, was a Scottish immigrant who acquired land along the Savannah River with the help of William I. Scott. Henry McAlpin was an unnaturalized citizen and therefore could not purchase land in Georgia. Scott bid \$1,500 at a public auction for the land previously belonging to J. Montalet.

whose debts totalled over \$5,000. Scott also purchased for McAlpin the tract which later formed the eastern boundary of the Hermitage, namely the Glebe Lands, for \$2,000.

Henry McAlpin was an architect and builder by profession. He established a brick foundary on the plantation and cultivated the low lying area as rice fields. The higher ground was used for a brick yard, a saw mill, and rice mill. Each mill was located near the river and had its own wharf for shipping.

McAlpin also built a railway system which was used to transport a huge cover for the brick kilns as they were processed. The brick manufacturing was a huge success and included the famous "Savannah grey brick" from clay of a grey color found on the Hermitage Plantation. The process used to produce bricks made them cheap and resulted in a large number of Savannah residences and buildings being constructed of Hermitage bricks. The Central of Georgia Railway built its station of these bricks and most of the bricks used in the construction of Fort Pulaski were made here. McAlpin

also was involved in the lumber business, raised hogs on Marsh Island, and eventually began an iron foundry on the Hermitage.²

Henry McAlpin accumulated over 600 acres by the time of his death in 1851. In his will he requested that the work of the Hermitage be continued under the management of Angus McAlpin, Ellen's father.³ He followed the requests of his father's will and by 1854 all of the six McAlpin brothers and sisters had received their share of the estate. Three of the brothers, Angus, James, and Donald, pooled their resources and formed "A. McAlpin and Brothers" and continued on until the outbreak of the war.⁴

Ellen McAlpin was first listed in the 1860 census. Her father's occupation was "Planter". His value of real estate was estimated at \$500 and his personal estate at \$5,700. Ellen also had a brother, Tinsley Rucker, age 1 year. At this time they were still living on the Hermitage. With the coming of the Civil War, Angus McAlpin, who previously was a 2nd lieutenant with the Georgia Hussars,⁵ along with brothers James, Donald and Henry joined in on the Confederate side.

This left Ellen's mother, Sarah Rucker McAlpin, to run the Hermitage. As Sherman's troops drew near, she gathered her family, which now included five children, Ellen, Tinsley, Angus Jr., Emma, and Georgia (who was only two weeks old) and fled up the Savannah River to a plantation in Eibert County, owned by her grandfather, Tinsley Rucker.⁶ Sarah McAlpin buried jewelry and silver beneath the oaks to protect them from Sherman's troops. The Hermitage was ransacked by Yankee troops who smashed furniture, broke windows and vandalized the property. I believe that this was probably the last time Ellen's family lived on the Hermitage Plantation.

After the war, deterioration of plantation's industry and the severe economic disasters of the War's aftermath, the McAlpin's lost possession of the Hermitage. It seems that in 1857, they had mortgaged some of their property to Aaron Champion, James McAlpin's father-in-law. With this mortgage still unpaid, they again took out a loan for over \$50,000 using their remaining property and one hundred and twenty slaves as collateral. At a public auction,

Aaron Champion bid \$6,000 for the Hermitage and took possession of it. He immediately turned over the property to a trust for his daughter, Maria and her children.⁷

A. McAlpin and Brothers dissolved the partnership they had previously formed by "mutual consent" on March 9, 1866 and the brothers seemed to have gone their separate ways, as far as business goes.⁸

Angus McAlpin was listed in the 1870 City Directory at the address of 116 South Broad Street, with the occupation of lumber measurer. However, his occupation in the 1870 census is that of cotton merchant, with a personal estate valued at \$10,000 and real estate at that same amount. Two more children followed this census. Sallie Margaret was born in September of 1871 and Florence in January of 1874.⁹

By this time, Ellen was a young woman and her parents sent her to Baltimore to finish her education at Madame LeFevre's School, which she attended for two years.¹⁰ On her return to Savannah, she joined

the Independent Presbyterian Church, by certificate, on March 1, 1877." She probably had been going to this church all of her life as her father joined in March of 1854.¹² However, the records I was able to research contained no baptismal record for Ellen, so this is purely speculation on my part.

Ellen saw tragedy occur in her life at an early age. In 1872 while playing with a group of friends, her brother Tinsley was "run against by one of his companions whose teeth struck him in the forehead knocking him down". It was a bizarre accident and resulted in Tinsley becoming ill. Shortly thereafter, he died with the cause of death listed as erysipelas, which is a type of blood infection.¹³

Two years later, when Ellen's mother was right outside of Clarksville, Georgia running a hotel, her brother Angus Jr. died on July 22, 1874 after accidentally shooting himself with a pistol he thought to be unloaded. This rendered a terrible blow to the McAlpin family as he was only twelve years old and the only remaining son.¹⁴

In the 1880 census, the McAlpin family included Angus, who was

listed as a lumber inspector, and Sarah as keeping house. The five McAlpin sisters included were Ellen, Bessie, Georgia, Sallie and Florence. The children were listed as being "in school" and Ellen appeared to be, at the age of 22, helping her mother take care of the family. Also listed at this time are two boarders, John Johnson and Anna Hopkins.

In 1885 Ellen's mother, Sarah died¹⁵ and three years later her father, Angus passed away from the effects of a stroke suffered a month earlier.¹⁶ Ellen summoned home her two sisters, Georgia and Sallie, who were away at school in Baltimore. At only thirty-one years old Ellen became both mother and father to her four sisters.¹⁷

Tragedy again struck the McAlpin family with the untimely death of Bessie McAlpin. She died on March 24, 1890 of heart failure at the young age of thirty. Her sister Ellen was with her.¹⁸

Though the 1890 census was destroyed, I can speculate that all of the remaining McAlpin sisters were living with Ellen. However, by 1900, only Sallie and Florence were still with Ellen. Florence had

married an attorney, H. Wylie Johnson four years earlier and had a daughter, Ellen McAlpin Johnson, who I assume must have been named for the Ellen of this paper. Also listed as living at 204 Oglethorpe Avenue were nine boarders and four servants. Ellen had surrounded herself with a various array of people as boarders. Several were teachers, one was a freight agent for the railroad and one was listed as a capitalist.

Ellen continued taking in boarders when she moved to 817 Whitaker Street in 1909. In the 1920 census Ellen's beloved sister Sallie was still with her along with fourteen boarders, one cook, and one maid. Ellen at this time was 63 years old.

SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS LIFE

Ellen McAlpin was a deeply religious woman. She was devoted to her church, the Independent Presbyterian Church, and to several organizations that were established to come to the aid and assistance of others. Her Christian faith was a great comfort to her and many deeply religious and philosophical writings were found among her manuscripts. Among them were such poems as "The Master's Questions" and the "Burial of Moses" both beautiful and meaningful religious works. Evidently, a bible lesson by a Mrs. Green (presumably of the Independent Presbyterian Church) entitled "Healing by Faith" greatly impressed Ellen as she had rewritten it its entire text in her journal. One entry that was set off from the others was a Chinese Proverb that Ellen must have particularly kept in mind as she became involved in her charities. It reads "with time and patience the mulberry leaf becomes satin." Another entry read "Remember you do not live in this world, but you pass through it." ¹⁹

Ellen joined the Independent Presbyterian Church by certificate on

March 1, 1877, when she was twenty-one years old. However, I believe Ellen had been attending this church long before this and this move was probably to establish her commitment to God and to her church as an adult. Her father, Angus, joined this church in March of 1859 by profession and it is known that he rented two pews in the church, number 133 and 134 from 1862 to 1865 at \$60 a year.

The next record of this began in 1875 to 1888 when pews were rented in the gallery of the church at the cost of \$25 a year.²⁰ Ellen enjoyed a life-long association with this church and became involved with the Women's Auxiliary. She worked with this organization for many years and by 1928 was made honorary President of the Auxiliary. In 1917 she was Vice-President of the Ladies Foreign Mission Society and by 1919 had become its President.²¹

On November 21st, 1843, the Savannah Port Society was organized right under the roof of the Independent Presbyterian Church to "carry on the work of the Penfield Mariners Church, which was to be discontinued due to a lack of money".²² It's not surprising to learn that Ellen attended an anniversary celebration of the Port Society

at her church in January of 1876. She was so impressed by an appeal made by Reverend Dr. Meyers of Wesley Monumental Church to rid the city of those who would take advantage of sailors away from home. Even though she was only a young girl of nineteen years, she became a leader and organizer right away. She formed a social circle of young girls known as the "Light-hearted Merry Lasses" who did errands and small jobs for the Port Society. She founded the Young Women's Port Sewing Society and immediately began campaigns to raise money for the society.²³

Ellen and her girls staged ice cream festivals and sold candy, turning over the proceeds to the Society. In the very first year this new organization turned over to the Port Society over \$700, of which \$350 came from the first ice cream festival. This was described in a Savannah Morning News article as a "gratifying success" with food, refreshments, and entertainment which continued the following day. Ellen remained active in the Society until 1882 when an illness took her away from the city for two years and the work of the young women gradually disappeared. When she returned in 1888, she again became its President and the Ladies Auxiliary of

the Savannah Port Society officially began.²⁴

Ellen served in this position until her death in 1934. On the 90th Birthday of the Port Society, Ellen was honored as the Auxiliary's first President. Her picture was in the Savannah Evening Press and it was noted that her portrait would soon be hung in the new Seaman's Center.²⁵

Ellen's work in the formation of the Young Women's Christian Association very important. As early as 1903, the Y.W.C.A. was an idea much in her mind. At a meeting in the Sunday School room in the Independent Presbyterian Church, with an opening prayer by Dr. James Y. Fair, Miss Emma Hays gave a brief speech on the YWCA's history and the work which it hoped to accomplish. It is not surprising that Ellen was on the committee to nominate a board of directors.²⁶ She wrote in an early record book on that day, January 20, 1904 that "there was enthusiasm for the organization, but the state of their finances was such that they could not keep a finance chairman for more than a few months at a time."²⁷

Ellen was a devoted Christian woman and committed herself to helping young women and assisting them in times of need. She saw the

need and wisdom in providing young women a Christian environment in which to live. On March 7th, 1904 Miss Lillian Bruce was hired as the executive director at a salary of \$60 a month. In April of the same year Ellen offered a prayer consecrating the rooms of the YWCA "to the high purpose for which they were intended."²⁸ The first YWCA was located in a building on Bull and Broughton, but it was soon realized that more room was needed. In October of 1904, the building at York and President was rented for the sum of \$60 per month with a residence for those in need.²⁹ The organization continued to grow and in 1923 a permanent building was dedicated on the corner of Oglethorpe Avenue and Whitaker Street.³⁰

Ellen served for five years as the YWCA'S president and then three more years in the Vice-President's position. She was elected honorary President and served in this capacity until the time of her death. In 1928, in a move to demonstrate continued interest and commitment, over twenty women bought lifetime memberships to the YWCA. Ellen was among them.³¹

I found a portrait of Ellen McAlpin that I estimate may have been

at about this time. She was a thin looking woman, about fifty to fifty-five. What most impressed me though was the kind looking expression she wore. She seemed to define my thoughts of a loving grandmotherly type with her graying hair pulled back in a bun on the top of her hair. She had spectacles perched on her nose and she reminds me of no-nonsense person who would get things done.³²

Ellen must have a terrific rapport with people. In her manuscripts I found a guest book, not for a party, but simply for people who visited her everyday. The list was full of old Savannah names including Mrs. Habersham, Mrs. L.L. Schley, Mrs. Levy, Mrs. Axson, Mrs. George Cope, Jr., Mrs. Julian Schley, the Minis', and Mrs. Lynah. No wonder in 1902 Ellen was listed in the Social Directory! She also had a column following the list of visitors where she would make a return call and the date.³³

PROPERTY

Ellen's family first appears in the 1870 Savannah City Directory at 116 South Broad Street. I do not think that the McAlpins owned this home for two reasons. One, a newspaper article of 1875 described Mrs. A. McAlpin as "letting" the home on South Broad to establish a boarding house.³⁴ I understand this to mean she rented the home and therefore would not be held responsible for paying the taxes. The second reason is that I was unable to uncover any record of a deed in the McAlpin name for this property. Neither Angus nor Sarah Rucker McAlpin were listed in the Tax Digests from the 1870's up to 1888. In 1894 Ellen is listed, for the first time as having paid \$7.50 for furniture valued at \$500. Ellen was not listed as having paid any property taxes in the records I checked.³⁵

However, because the McAlpins lived here for so long the property deserves to be mentioned. It can be described as being located in Heathcote Ward, Lot 6, Vernon Tything, the north west corner of West Oglethorpe and Barnard Street. It was assigned the address of 168 South Broad Street and was later known as 204 West Oglethorpe.³⁶

The structure is no longer standing but can be reconstructed by using a fire map of 1909. The building was a three story brick dwelling over a basement and a fire wall of 18 inches extended beyond the roof. There were five fireplaces in the house with a shingle roof.³⁷ This home was later demolished and, by 1916, a completely different building was standing in its place. That building today is unoccupied.

In 1909 Ellen purchased a home from the estate of Col. George Mercer known by the street address of 817 Whitaker Street. This home was more specifically named as lot number four and the southern half of lot number three in Lloyd Ward. It had a frontage on Whitaker Street of ninety feet with a rectangular depth along Bolton Street of 131 feet extending to Howard Street. It was a three-story brick building over a basement with a two-floored wooden structure on the back, most likely a porch. There was a free standing structure in the corner of the lot along Bolton and Howard Streets.³⁸ This dwelling is no longer standing and the lot is used for parking.

Also on the same day this sale was received for documentation, another deed was made between Ellen and Mrs. Jennie Dub. It showed

that Mrs. Dub owned the property adjacent to Ellen and had made improvements to the northern half of Lot 3, Lloyd Ward that extended on to the southern half of Lot 3, belonging to Ellen. It was simply an agreement between the two recognizing the proper ownership of the encroached property as Ellen's and a promise that Mrs. Dub would not claim ownership of the land. The deed further stated that should the improvements be destroyed by fire or any other cause, that they would be replaced upon the true lot lines of the two parties.³⁹

Also dated on June 24th, 1909 is an indenture made by Ellen McAlpin to Maud Hill for eleven thousand dollars. This loan was made through the request of H. Wylie Johnson, Ellen's brother-in-law and husband of her sister Florence. Attached to the end of this deed was an agreement that H. Wylie Johnson would repay the loan should Ellen be unable to keep her end of the bargain.⁴⁰

Ellen's parents had taken in boarders as early as 1873 and Ellen continued on in this fashion when she moved to Whitaker Street. Found among her manuscripts was a guest book with some interesting entries. Ellen noted in the book that she moved to Whitaker Street

on September 7, 1909. Her first boarder was Lieutenant B. Newman from the Treasury Department. He stayed only one night, September 9, 1909 and in the comments column next to his name, Ellen neatly wrote "Christened the house on Whitaker."

Though Ellen listed her boarding house in the City Directory, most people just knew about "Miss Ellen's" boarding house and would come to stay for weeks and months at a time. Mr. and Mrs. R. Habersham Clay came and stayed at Ellen's on Oglethorpe Avenue in 1896 and made a visit to Whitaker Street in October of 1909. Robert Bradford Adams and Mrs. Mildred Adams came in April of 1911 and stayed until November of 1912. Often people would write their own comments and a Mrs. Abby Dennister and Miss C.M. Dennister wrote "a delightful time in Savannah with dear Miss McAlpin".

There were two entries that deserve special notice. A Mr. Robert Dunning Dripps came to the boarding house on November 12, 1906 and stayed until November 19, 1906. In the comment column, in what I believe to be Ellen's handwriting, are the words "bad fellow." This was probably the worst thought she ever had. The second entry belonged to Miss Lillian Hortensia Bruce whose home address was

listed as 60 1/2 Shepard Street, Cambridge Mass. She arrived on April 8, 1904 and left July 1, 1907. She was the first director of the Y.W.C.A., and I would not be surprised if Ellen let her stay without paying or at a reduced price.

Ellen was a businesswoman who probably handled all the financial aspects of running her boarding house. Tucked within her guest book were pieces of paper with figures on them indicating the charges for staying in her boarding house. For example, Misses McCoy and Cousey came after tea on Monday and left after breakfast on Friday. They were charged \$2 each per day and stayed 3 and 3/4 days, for a total of \$15. Ellen knew when people were coming and would have their rooms ready for them.⁴¹

No occupation was every listed for Ellen and I can only assume that she supported herself over the years by running a boarding house.

DEATH

Ellen McAlpin died on the morning of October 10, 1934. The cause of death was officially listed as chronic endocarditis. She was attended to by Dr. T. P. Waring, himself a Savannah institution. I can only assume that he was with Ellen when she passed away as he listed October 10, 1934 as the last time he saw her alive and the time of death was early in the morning. Ellen was 76 years old.⁴²

Fox and Weeks handled the funeral services with burial in Laurel Grove Cemetery, Lot number 198.⁴³ Already buried there were Angus, Sarah, Elizabeth, Tinsley, and Angus Jr. McAlpin. On a visit to Laurel Grove I found very simple tombstones of flat white stone. Strangely, only Ellen's had any inscription other than name and date of birth and death. At the bottom of her stone is so appropriately written "Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord." There is no fence or outlining stone to this McAlpin family plot.⁴⁴

Ellen's life story was beautifully written up in the Savannah paper. It spoke of her devotion to her sisters, her charities, and to her church. The article said "she was very much beloved by the colored people of the city, ... and that many women from the city market, where she was a familiar figure, had visited her during her last illness."⁴⁵

Ellen had written a will dated July 30, 1930 four years before she died. It was more than likely drawn up by her brother-in-law, H. Wylie Johnson, although this was not specifically stated, and witnessed by Margaret Smith, J.I. Killorin, and Julian F. Corish. In her will she first asked that all her debts be paid by the executor. She next asked that the disposal of her personal effects to her family and friends and bequests to certain charities be made.

She said that these gifts would be specified in a handwritten attached memo to her will.⁴⁶ Most unfortunately, this was not found with the will. Perhaps this was something she had always meant to write, but never found time or really much worse, this memo may have been lost in the shuffle of papers in the 59 years since her death. I can say that there is no doubt in my mind that she would have made donations to the Y.W.C.A. and the Savannah Port Society as these two charities were so much a part of her life.

Nevertheless, Ellen, gentle soul that she was, gave all of her property and estate to her beloved sister, Sallie. A trust was created and gave the executor the power to sell or dispose of her property without having to obtain a court order to do so.

Ellen very prudently specified that in the event of Sallie's untimely death, her sister Florence McAlpin Johnson, would inherit her estate and later Florence's children, should she be not living.

On October 26, 1932, Ellen made a codicil to her will.

Previously she had named H. Wylie Johnson as executor of her will with the Citizens and Southern National Bank of Savannah to be executor in the event of his death. She now wished to change that to H. Wylie Johnson as executor and in the event of his death, her sister, Florence McAlpin Johnson to replace him. In the event of her death, the bank would then become executor.⁴⁷ Two years later, Ellen died and, one year later, Florence also passed away.

Ellen's estate remained active until 1960. On the death of H. Wylie Johnson in 1952, Julian Corish became executor of Ellen's estate and administered it until 1960. Sallie McAlpin died in 1956 and the remainder of Ellen's estate went to Ellen McAlpin Johnson, her niece and daughter of Florence McAlpin Johnson.⁴⁸

Interviews

My first interview was not with a McAlpin descendent at all, but must be mentioned because it led me to Mrs. Kirk McAlpin. In the Georgia Historical Society there is, on deposit, several boxes of old records and documents pertaining to the Y.W.C.A. Although I was unable to see them, I did find out that Mrs. Dorothy Courington, an attorney and last President of the Y.W.C.A., had given them to the Society.

In a telephone conversation with her on October 6, 1993, Mrs. Courington confirmed this. Unfortunately, she had not gone through the boxes herself and the person who did was no longer living in Savannah. However, she did recall some discussion with members of the McAlpin family concerning a portrait of Ellen McAlpin which had hung in the Y.W.C.A. building. She was unable to recall what ever happened to this portrait.

On October 6, 1993, I spoke with Mrs. Kirk McAlpin, whose husband was Ellen's cousin through James Wallace McAlpin. She said that her family was living in Atlanta at the time, but was contacted about Ellen's portrait. She assured me that, yes indeed, it is hanging in her home on East 44th Street.

On October 21, 1993, I spoke with Mr. and Mrs. Aaron Champion McAlpin in their home on East 46th Street. Mr. McAlpin was Ellen's cousin through James Wallace McAlpin. He pointed out that his memories of Ellen were vague as he was a young fellow when he knew Ellen. He mostly remembers Ellen and her sister Sallie as two old maid sisters. He also remembered going to their home on Whitaker Street as a young man. He recalls that Ellen was a typical looking Scotswoman, rather spare with a ruddy complexion. He later went off

into the military and on his return learned of Ellen's death. He did live in Ellen's boarding house in the latter thirties when he was working at the library on Bull Street, but by that time someone else owned the home.

On November 3, 1993, I spoke with Mrs. Katherine Strong, who was Ellen's cousin through James Wallace McAlpin. She remembers Ellen's boarding house because her mother, Maria Champion McAlpin, lived there while Ellen was still living. Maria McAlpin was a first grade school teacher at the Pape School before marrying Katherine's father, Joseph Churchill Strong. Ms. Strong remembers her mother saying that the livingroom doors were always open and there was little privacy for her to visit with her beau! I asked Ms. Strong if she had any articles from the Hermitage Plantation, but she does not. She remembers that an aunt, Daisy Schley, had some things, maybe a few pieces of china, but these were auctioned off after her death. Katherine Strong actually lived in the Champion-McAlpin House at 230 E. Barnard Street from the time she was two until age twelve.

I also inquired if she had any knowledge of a portrait of Henry McAlpin that at one time had been in Ellen's possession. She said that she thought either Ellen or Sallie had given it to the Telfair Academy. Her own memories of Ellen and Sallie are just that of old maid sisters.

She told me of an interesting story of a family rumor that the first Henry McAlpin, builder of the Hermitage Plantation, was descended from a king of Scotland. It seems that a student was doing some research on the family and was corresponding with a McAlpin family member. This student made a trip to Scotland and actually

found two old McAlpin aunts living in an old and ancient castle.

Alas, for us, there was no further correspondence with the researcher and that was the end of that.

On November 15, 1993, I received a down-to-the-wire phone call from Mrs. Strong, who happened to remember another family story concerning the Hermitage. It seems that when Sherman's troops came and stayed on the plantation, they put former slaves who had small pox in beds in the big house, in the Hermitage Mansion. I guess this was their way of letting us Southerners know who was in charge.

Mrs. Strong also remembers that there is a small, duplicate of the Hermitage on display in the Massie School and would be of interest to anyone.

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