

MARY LENOX SHEAFE

'19th Century diaries reveal religious history of the area", by Rena Corey.
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The journals of Mary Lenox Sheafe, held by the Wappingers Historical Society, tell us almost nothing about this little remembered figure of our town's past. The word "I" never appears in her writings which span the years 1840 to 1858 . We gain no inkling of her taste in friends or fashion. She pens nothing of her husband , her relatives nor any of the people in her life. And yet, we learn much of Mary Lenox Sheafe.

In every paragraph of every page are her notes on the sermons preached at Presbyterian churches in New York City and New Hamburg, as well as churches she attended for over a year throughout the European Continent . So we know from these entries that she was pious, rich, and highly modest.

Born in 1803 to Robert Lenox and Rachel Carmer, she was one of twelve children, ten of whom lived to adulthood. The most prominent of her siblings was James Lenox who inherited from their merchant father several million dollars and 30 acres of land between Fourth and Fifth Avenues in New York City. James' collection of paintings and rare books(including the first Gutenberg Bible to come to the United States) became a third of the collection forming ,with the Astor and Tilden holdings, the New York Public Library.

Like so many wealthy New Yorkers of their day, they purchased country property enabling them to escape the heat and frequent pestilence of the city. New Hamburg in the 1830's became the Nob Hill of Dutchess County.

In 1837 James Lenox bought Vanderbilt land and built "Netherwood;" Mrs. James Sheafe built "The Cedars;" her son, John Fisher Sheafe who married Mary Lenox in 1828, built "High Cliff" and a brother-in-law, James Donaldson built 'Chestnut Hill.'" (This was located where Mt. Alvernia now stands).

Mary and her brother built the Ellesdie Chapel, enabling them to hold Presbyterian services on their grounds. A play on a Mozart hymn of the same name, Ellesdie stood for the first letters of the last names of the three families: Lenox, Sheafe, and Donaldson. In later years the chapel was moved to New Hackensack but through community effort returned to New Hamburg and now stands at the entrance to Bowdoin Park.

By 1849 the railroad tracks had cut off the estates from the river and a more than irritated James Lenox left New Hamburg. His property was purchased by a railroad investor, Gardiner Green Howland, Sr. The property passed to Howland's son who sold it to his sister, Mrs. Irving Grinnell, for \$60,000.00. Another sister married George S. Bowdoin. They bought land and built a mansion called, "Oakhurst." Eventually the Bowdoins purchased all of the Sheafe estate and between 1929 and 1946 donated all their parcels to the Children's Aid Society. [More of the CAS and Bowdoin Park in a future *Voices*.]

Mary's husband, was the son of James Sheafe, a member of Congress from 1799-1801 and a New Hampshire State Senator. The family had pre-colonial roots which often dictated a careful juxtaposition between Tory and American sympathies. Wealthy and well connected in his own right, John Fisher Sheafe was prominently cited in papers of the day for his purchases of top bred cattle which were kept on their New Hamburg estate. Mary, however, had more interest in people, than herds.

A June 5, 1948 newspaper clipping in the WHS library highlights the "Presbyterian Centennial Program" to be held in Wappingers Falls the next day. " Much of the credit for the establishment of a Presbyterian Church in Wappingers Falls goes to Mrs. John Fisher Sheafe.... It was at her suggestion that the Rev. John D. Wells, who was preaching at the Sheafe Chapel (Ellesdie) went to Wappingers to investigate the need for a church." And in her journal of 1848, Mary writes: " Dr. Phillips (W.W. Phillips, First Presbyterian Church, NY) was at High Cliff and dedicated the church at Franklindale." Built with funds supplied chiefly by Mary, it was dedicated on Aug. 16, 1848. The church stood on Fulton Street at the foot of Prospect and was used for some 25 years. An apartment complex that stands there today, appears to be that building.

Mary Lenox Sheafe built the manse and " gave it rent free with an additional \$200 a year toward the support of the pastor."

The building identified in the 1979 landmark survey of Wappinger buildings identifies the structure at 2602 Route 9D as the manse. Edgar Popper tells us in his splendid 1977 history of the village,* that it was completed in 1853 but a sign on the now residential home, states 1857.

When the congregation outgrew the facility at Fulton and Prospect, "...the old church property was sold and the present brick structure on South Avenue (Route 9D) was built. Mrs. Sheafe contributed generously to the cost of this." She continued giving funds until the church was freed from debt.

Simultaneously, Mary was involved with Presbyterian endeavors in New York City, her primary residence.

Unable to find suitable institutional housing for an Irish clergyman's daughter and an elderly lady, a Miss McBride, Mary proposed a denominational home be erected for them and others in their circumstances. In 1866, 45 Grove Street was opened as the first specifically Presbyterian domicile with Mary as the Directress. During the first year of its existence donations ranged from \$5.00 to \$2000, with the largest amount being donated by her brother, James .

Soon, the Grove Street building was filled to capacity. At that time James Lenox owned farmland from 68 to 74th Streets and from Fifth to Park Avenues. To assist in the placement of a new home, James sold four lots on 73rd Street for the sum of \$10.00. On May 10, 1870 a magnificent building was erected and named the Presbyterian Home for Aged Women. Mary continued in her position as Directress while she continued to support the Wappingers Falls church and to teach Sunday School in New Hamburg at Ellesdie.

In 1973 the old Home was razed and a modern brick building took its place. Now, non-denominational and open to Seniors of all genders and races, the James Lenox House continues Mary's 146 year old plan. And there, in the heart of Manhattan, her memory is alive and revered through the Mary Lenox Sheafe Award given annually to an outstanding recipient.

Amazingly, there is no known photograph, portrait, or drawing of Mary. An image of her mansion, High Cliff, in Joyce Ghee's book, Halfway Up the Hudson, shows a blurred grouping of people on the front porch . Presumably, Mary is among them.

Think of Mary when next you visit Sheafe Road, or pass the Presbyterian Church. She and brother James both lie at rest in the Marble Cemetery on E. 2nd Street in Manhattan, Vault 124.



THE ORIGINAL HOME FOR PRESBYTERIAN WOMEN ON EAST 73RD STREET, NYC.



THE ORIGINAL MANSE FOR THE PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH ON ROUTE
9D.



ELLESDIE CHAPEL AT THE ENTRANCE TO BOWDOIN PARK.

** Edgar Popper's book, The Birth and Growth of an Old Village, is an indispensable reference and a must have for anyone interested in the history of the village and surrounding areas. It's available at the Wappingers Historical Society. www.wappingershistoricalsociety.org*