

Mary Hoyt Sherman

There is probably no braver heroine in Fairfield County's early history than Mary Hoyt Sherman, the mother of Civil War General, William Tecumseh Sherman. Nothing in her gentle and genteel upbringing could have prepared her for the hardships, heartache and eventual poverty that she endured and survived.

Mary was born December 28, 1787 in Norwalk, Connecticut. Her father, Isaac Hoyt, was a wealthy merchant and her mother, Mary (Raymond) Hoyt, was also from one of the founding families in Norwalk. It was not a common practice in those days for girls to obtain higher education but Mary's parents sought for her the best school they could find. They selected Harlem Seminary in Norwalk. When Mary was only 13 the English ladies, M. E. and A. Sketchley, who ran the school, moved to Poughkeepsie, New York to open a boarding school for privileged young women. Mary followed them to Poughkeepsie where she became a boarding student. She studied reading, writing, ciphering, grammar, French, geography, dancing, drawing, music and embroidery. Like other students of the school, Mary became accomplished in elegant needlework and she completed a number of samplers and pictures that her mother had framed and included in her dowry.

On May 10, 1810, Mary married her neighbor and childhood sweetheart, Charles Robert Sherman. He was born September 26, 1788 to Judge Taylor Sherman and his wife Elizabeth Stoddard Sherman. Charles had read law under his father and another noted attorney and then was admitted to the Connecticut Bar.

The young Shermans had been married only a few months when Charles left Mary in Connecticut while he traveled to the young state of Ohio to explore the 1280 acres his father owned in northeastern Ohio. Charles was eager to see the land in this new territory and perhaps settle there and open a law practice. When he arrived in Ohio he learned that the Indians were engaged in war with white settlers in the northern part of the state. Feeling it was not safe to go north at that time, he instead followed the southern route of Zane's Trace through Zanesville to Lancaster. So pleased was he with the beauty and the promise of a bright future in Lancaster that he returned to Norwalk to convince Mary that they should settle there. He arrived in Connecticut in time to be with Mary for the birth of their first child. Charles Taylor Sherman was born February 3, 1811.

Shortly after the baby was born, the Shermans began to prepare to move to Ohio. Mary spun sheets to cover the wagon they would use to carry the few possessions they could take with them. Carrying the baby on a pillow in front of her as they started the trip on horseback, they began their trip with other families headed west. Mary bravely, but sadly, said goodbye to her family, her friends and the comforts of her home. It took abundant courage and faith in her husband to leave that civilized established community for almost two months of hard, wilderness travel to a place she had not seen. She never again returned to her native Connecticut.

When the Shermans arrived in Lancaster they moved into a little brown salt-box shaped, frame house near the center of town. Settlement in Lancaster had only begun to take place in 1800, and

it was still a fledgling town. Future growth was almost assured because it was located on a major mail route from Washington, D.C. to Kentucky.

Charles and Mary established a comfortable home and it became a social gathering place for stimulating, intellectual conversation. Many visiting dignitaries such as Henry Clay and New York Governor DeWitt Clinton were welcomed into their home and enjoyed the company of the Shermans who were among the most educated couple in town. Mary's finishing school experiences had prepared her for such entertaining.

The Shermans' first few years in Lancaster were probably the most prosperous times in their married life. As Charles' law practice grew, their family also continued to grow. Daughter, Mary Elizabeth was born on April 21 the year after they arrived in Lancaster. James, their second son, and named for Mary's brother, James Hoyt, was born December 12, 1814. This baby was only a few months old when Charles' father, Judge Taylor Sherman, died unexpectedly and Charles' mother and his sister, Elizabeth, came to live with them.

The little brown house, with only a kitchen, a parlor and two upstairs bedrooms was now extremely overcrowded. So the Shermans added a larger parlor and a law office for Charles downstairs and two bedrooms upstairs in 1816. By the time the family was able to occupy the new rooms, another daughter, Amelia, had been born on February 18, of that year.

It was also in 1816 that the Sherman family began to experience financial difficulties from which they would never recover. Charles had been appointed by President James Madison to supervise deputy collectors of Internal Revenue for the Third District in Ohio, a position he held for 4 years. In 1816 the U.S. government decided no longer to accept paper currency issued by local banks for payment of taxes. Charles' deputies had already collected payment in now worthless local script so he mortgaged his home and borrowed money against his future earnings to pay the taxes in acceptable legal tender. He spent the remainder of his life trying to pay off this debt.

Mary delivered her third daughter, Julia Ann, July 24, 1818. Two years later, their third son, whom they named William Tecumseh was born February 14, 1820.

In order to earn more money Charles took on the added job of serving as a circuit-riding attorney. In 1823 he was made a Justice in the Ohio Supreme Court, an appointment also required that he often be away from home riding the circuit. With his mother and sister living with the family, Mary could sometimes get away from home and ride the circuit with Charles.

Mary delivered her seventh child, Lampson Parker Sherman, October 13, 1821. Just nineteen months later, on May 10, 1823 another son, John, was born. His sister, Susan Denman Sherman followed on October 10, 1825. On November 1, 1827, the Sherman's 10th child, Hoyt, was born. Their last child, Frances Beecher (Fanny) was born May 5, 1829.

In June of 1829, Mary Sherman was dealt a devastating blow. Her husband had become ill with suspected typhoid fever while serving on the circuit in Lebanon. She left immediately to be with him but by the time she reached Washington Court House, she was notified that he had died. Their son, Jim, and Charles' cousin were with him. Charles was only 40 years old.

The grieving widow was suddenly left with a baby who was only 7 weeks old and 10 other children (the oldest of whom was only 18), a mortgaged house and almost no means to support her family. Mary had to face the heart wrenching decision that she would not long be able to keep all of her children with her. Over time she was forced to consent to giving them over to loving relatives and caring friends to raise.

The oldest, 18 year old Charles, was near the end of his studies at Ohio University. He went to live with an uncle who was an attorney in Mansfield and to “read law” under him. Sixteen year-old Elizabeth soon married William Reece and they took 10 year old Julia to live with them. Fourteen year-old Jim was already a store clerk living with friends in Cincinnati. Amelia, who was thirteen was taken in by relatives in Mansfield. Nine year-old Tecumseh (known by his family as “Cump”) went next door to live with Sherman family friends, the Thomas Ewing family. Lampson, who was 7, went to live with Cincinnati newspaperman, Charles Hammond. For a while, 6 year old, John, stayed with his mother and later was taken in by relatives in Mt. Vernon.

Mary was able to keep 3 year old Susan, 1 year old Hoyt and baby Frances with her. She stayed in her little brown house until Fanny was 15 but she had a difficult time. She took in boarders to help make ends meet and she was able to pay off her house. By then John, now 21, had passed the bar and was becoming a financially successful attorney. The year was 1844 and he persuaded her to come to Mansfield to live with him..

Just before her 65th birthday, Mary went to Cleveland to the Ohio State Fair. She caught cold which worsened into a probable case of pneumonia. She died quietly in Mansfield in 1852. She is buried beside Charles in Elmwood Cemetery in Lancaster.

We know of no photos or paintings of Mary Hoyt Sherman but her children remembered her as a kind and loving mother who intervened in their behalf when their stern grandmother, whom she adored, was living with them.

Mary didn't live to see her “Cump” recognized following the Civil War as one of the two most distinguished generals of his time and his subsequent advancement to Commanding General of the U. S. Army. It was 2 years after her death that her son, John, was elected to the U. S. House of Representatives where he served for 6 years and elected to the U S Senate where he served for thirty years. He was author of the Sherman Anti-trust Act and the Sherman Silver Purchase Act. He was Secretary of the Treasury in President Rutherford B. Hayes' Cabinet and Secretary of State under President McKinley. Hoyt, her 10th child, became an attorney in Des Moines, Iowa, was elected Clerk of the Polk County District Court and was appointed by President Zachary Taylor as postmaster of Des Moines. After a career in banking he was one of the organizers of the state bank of Iowa. As a major in the Civil War, he was appointed paymaster of the Union Army by President Lincoln. He was elected to the Iowa House of Representatives and was president of the Equitable Life Insurance Co. of Des Moines.

But Mary's other eight children were also special. Charles became a highly respected lawyer in Mansfield. Mary Elizabeth married wealthy Philadelphia lawyer and merchant, William Reese,

who built for her the beautiful mansion next to Mary's house (now the Decorative Arts Center.) James moved to Des Moines, Iowa where he was a successful businessman. Amelia married a Lancaster man and they moved to Mansfield where he became a business partner with her uncle, Judge Parker. Julia Ann married John Gibbie Willock ,a Scotland native, and she died just 4 years after her marriage. After careers in newspapers and banking in Cincinnati, Lampson and his family moved to Des Moines, Iowa where he was a newspaper editor and mayor of the city. Susan married Thomas Wells Bartley, a Mansfield attorney, who became a member of the Ohio House of Representatives, a State Senator, a judge of the Ohio Supreme Court, President of the Senate and acting Governor of Ohio. Fanny married attorney Charles Moulton in Mansfield. He also served as a Colonel in the Civil War. They later moved to New York City.

Mary would be pleased to know that, after serving as home to several other families, her treasured "little brown house" on Main Street has been faithfully restored and is lovingly cared for by the Fairfield Heritage Association. Two of her beautiful needlework pictures done while she was at Sketchley School are back in her home and are displayed there in all their splendor. The Sherman House is open every afternoon except Mondays from 1-4 PM, April through early December or by appointment.