

CATHARINE STRATTON LADD 1808-1899

Catharine Stratton was born in the second decade following the American Revolution in Richmond, Virginia, the daughter of an immigrant Scotch-Irish father and a mother born in Virginia. She was raised by her mother and grandmother, both of whom were widowed when Catharine was yet a few years of age. Catharine was likely educated in one of many female academies established in Richmond during the Federal period.

Richmond City of Catharine's youth was a bustling international port on the James River, where native sons like President Thomas Jefferson, Chief Justice John Marshall and James Madison walked the capital streets for political, commercial and legal business, as well as entertainment. The city boasted a science museum, a popular theater, a wax museum and open-air, live performance art where large paintings were executed with music and light displays for the public. Actors and musicians flourished, and writers like Edgar Allen Poe published poetry and stories in *The Southern Literary Messenger*. In 1824 the marquis de Lafayette paid a state visit to America, parading through Richmond where his appearance made a life-long impression on fourteen-year-old Catharine. The experiences of her childhood provided Catharine with a nationalist zeal and an inspiration for teaching, writing and the arts.

Sometime before 1827 Catharine Stratton met George W.L. Ladd, a seaman and itinerant portrait artist from New Hampshire, whom she married in 1828. They immediately left Richmond for Charleston, South Carolina along with Catharine's mother, Anne Collins Stratton, to follow George Ladd's quest for art patrons. Catharine advertised for female students interested in artistic pursuits such as drawing, painting and needlework. Thus began the Ladds' life as partners in education and the arts. In the first ten years of marriage they traveled throughout the southeast seeking patrons for female schools and portrait painting. By 1839 Catharine and George were back in South Carolina, and in 1844 they settled permanently in Fairfield County as educators and artists. By the end of the decade the Ladds were a family of eight.

The Woodward family initially invited the Ladds to open the Winnsborough Female Seminary, operating from 1844 to 1845 under Catharine Ladd. However it was not until 1849 that the Ladds purchased a building in Winnsborough for the school and resumed its operation under Catharine. [She was principal of Feasterville Female Seminary during the interim years.] Catharine was the principal, assisted in teaching by George and a staff of three females. The 1850 U.S. population census lists 41 boarding students from Fairfield and nearby counties living at the Ladd residence/school. The Ladds' rising social and economic status from 1850 to 1860 coincided with the height of prosperity for Southern planters who had the means to commission portrait artists and educate their children. Fairfield County in 1860 ranked third in the state in free [person's] per capita wealth with a population that was 71% black (Walter Edgar, *South Carolina: A History*, Table 13.2).

With their academy enrollment increasing, George purchased the Ketchin House in 1852 naming it Winnsborough Female Institute. Catharine increasingly adopted a rigorous academic curriculum while offering popular ornamental choices in art and music. With Mrs. C. Ladd as Principal the school employed eight additional staff including Mr. J. R. Schorb, the first photographer in the region, music teachers with national credentials and George Ladd who managed the painting and writing department. Ten years later the institute offered a four-year course of study; girls who completed their studies received a silver medal. Catharine's reputation as an educator and organizer enabled their financial progress as the demand for portraits waned with the rising popularity of photography. Her husband, son Albert W. Ladd and daughter Josie N. Ladd were teachers. Their successful family business was enhanced financially by Catharine's other profession, writing.

Beginning in the 1830s Catharine published poems in *The Southern Literary Messenger*, as well as essays and stories in popular periodicals. Her voice was anonymous, as she wrote under pseudonyms, a common venue for female authors of the day. It was a lucrative profession, producing a viable income for women who were limited to a domestic "sphere of influence" by antebellum society. Given their increasing financial resources, a staff of instructors, Mrs. Anne Stratton to possibly supervise the boarding students and ownership of seven slaves to maintain the running of a large female school, Catharine had time to devote to her literary endeavors. In Winnsborough she began writing plays, formed a Thespian Corps and directed the performance of plays at the Thespian Hall in town. According to biographies written during her lifetime, Catharine penned essays on education and political issues, advocating white labor in the South while denouncing a slave-based system of labor as ultimately unprofitable. Although Catharine possessed the gift of foresight, it was not enough to stem the tide of destruction ahead.

As the nation plunged into Civil War, Catharine divided her energies among her family, the war effort, writing and teaching. She embraced the Confederacy, joining with George in submitting a design for the Confederate national flag in 1861. Author and vexillologist, Devereaux D. Cannon, Jr. believes their flag was

chosen by the Committee on Flag and Seal for its final design, with slight alterations. She directed the Fairfield Ladies Aid Society, sending needed items, including her telescope, to the war front. In 1862 George Ladd sold the Ketchin house and moved his family to another location; he died of infirmity two years later. The following year while Gen. Slocum's Union troops occupied Winnsborough "27 houses were burned, among them Mrs. Ladd's two" (Elizabeth Porcher's letter to her husband, March 1865). Letters from the Jackson family in Winnsborough confirmed that Catharine continued to teach during the war.

As the curtain seemed to draw on Catharine's life, she used her pen to express personal despair, but also to encourage the residents of Fairfield County to rebuild their lives. She reopened the Winnsborough Female Institute with Rev. J. Obear. She purchased the Thespian Hall building and offered it to the community for meetings and performances, organizing concerts and charging admission to help defray the costs. She submitted her opinions to the newspapers and in circulars. Given the evidence of her life story prior to the Civil War, a life that defied the norms for women of her time, it is not surprising that she would aggressively express her opinion with the pen following the war. In a surviving essay written in 1868 attributed to Catharine Ladd, is perhaps the best example of her life-long desire to promote a better future for the citizens of Fairfield County, the South and America.

South Carolina was about to reenter the Union, adopt a new state constitution, elect a governor and vote for a President. The essay entitled "New Improvement" was clearly addressed to the people of Fairfield County, and if printed, was possibly circulated as an unsigned pamphlet. The hand-written original copy ends with a cipher that appears to be CL. The tone expressed in the paper clearly would present a personal danger to any author if recognized. Yet in the small community where she lived, Catharine was likely to be known as its originator. It was a remarkable effort from a woman who was ahead of her time, who opened educational opportunities to females throughout the South, left a literary and artistic legacy and proved that women could have a voice and influence beyond the "domestic sphere."

Catharine grew blind toward the end of her long life. While living in the Monticello community she devoted herself to gardening and writing poetry of a religious nature. At her death in 1899 Catharine Stratton Ladd was buried in the Salem Presbyterian Church cemetery with other family members.

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