Catherine deRosset Kennedy 1800-1889

FANNY deROSET

Over a century and a half ago, Catherine Gabriella deRosset Kennedy was born in Wilmington, North Carolina where she spent most of her life. Her parents were Dr. Armand John deRosset II, and Catherine Fullerton deRosset. They were of the noblesse of France and had come to the Cape Fear country because of the political upheaval and religious intolerance rampant in their native France. In a happy household of a brother and sisters, under the watchful eye of their parents, Catherine grew into a thoughtful child with almost a maturity. She liked older people and watched for an opportunity to perform some act of kindness for them. About this time the population of New Hanover County was less than 15,000 and boasted of one school. Catherine’s education was primarily in the home under the tutorial system as was the custom for the families who could afford it, public schools being in the most formulative state. It was thought Catherine might become a teacher as she loved to gather her contemporaries together and drill them in spelling and reading. Not holding to the rudimentary subjects, she went into Christian education, such as Bible lessons and the catechism. Not overlooking the children of the slaves and former slaves, she also gave them special attention in these subjects. As she approached her twenties, she became more and more interested in civic and philanthropic activities spending her time with the aged and indigent women in the community, in many cases seeing that they had food and medical attention. She organized a clinic for the purpose of maintaining health standards, and while thus engaged she met a zealous itinerant preacher, the Rev. Wm. M. Kennedy, sometimes a minister in charge of Grace Methodist Church then located at 6th and Mulberry Streets.

At the age of forty, she and the minister were married. No children were born to their union. Her interest in the underprivileged never waned and she stood ready to help whenever the opportunity permitted. Love and devotion based on the Golden Rule was her measurement.

It was not long before the question of erecting some sort of home to care for these old folks in the community came to light. In 1840, “The Old Ladies Rest” was established at 7th Street between Chestnut and Mulberry Streets. In spite of inadequate housing and scant funds, the Home continued to serve its purpose for seven years. Within a few years, Mrs. Kennedy, with great ability and insight, called together a group of dedicated women to form a better and permanent organization. The public was not slow to recognize her vision and leadership. Letters asking for funds were sent by the scores; the horse and buggy made calls on the stores and when the purpose was made known to establish a permanent home for the aging, benefactors both large and small poured in from all walks of the town. In 1852 sufficient funds were available and a former residence at 7th and Grace Streets belonging to the Sprunts was purchased and with it came a gift of three completely furnished rooms from the previous owners. The first seven ladies moved in. Again the name was changed to read, “The Ladies Benevolent Society, Inc.” and so chartered. In 1855 it was reported that this was the first home of its kind in the United States. This period of 1852 with its program of giving food, clothing and shelter to the poor and needy was a forerunner, long in advance of our present Associated Charities and left its strong impact.

Only a few years elapsed before the War between the States was declared. Here again we see further duties and responsibilities placed on the shoulders of Catherine Kennedy. She was asked to take a contingency of sick and injured discharged Confederate soldiers to Petersburg, Virginia, for nursing care. There she remained on volunteer nursing duty for several months. It was told of a visit of the President of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis, when he was on his last mission to Wilmington. Mrs. Kennedy, hearing of his sudden illness, prepared a bowl of soup and had it delivered to his train.

It is not surprising from the above sketch, that a larger and more spacious Home would develop, so numerous were the demands for residency. Kennedy Home was brought into being. A beautiful home formerly occupied by the Elliot family was purchased in 1950. To this was added two wings and given the names of two deceased presidents of the Board, i.e. Margaret Walker and Mrs. W. A. Whiteside. The bedrooms and lounges were all that could be desired and the dining room and kitchen facilities of the best. Accommodations provided for seventy-five residents, women and men. A Chapel and many memorials were given to bless this great achievement.

The name given the Home was for the founder and first President, Catherine Kennedy, who had long ago gone to her rest. Surely the words, “Well done thou good and faithful servant, enter into the Heavenly home your loving Father has prepared for you,” would be most applicable to Catherine deRosset Kennedy.
NEW MEMBERS

Mrs. Paul V. Cox, 8861 Riverview Road, Oxon Hill, Maryland 20022

Mr. W. H. B. Simpson, Box 528, Greenville, S. C. 29601

Mr. A. Wray Thompson, Route 1, Box 445, Chadbourn, N. C. 28431

Mrs. Leslie S. Thompson, News-Reporter Co., Whiteville, N. C. 28472

Miss Yvonne Thompson, P. O. Box 502, Whiteville, N. C. 28472

MEETING

Mr. Gary Eyster, Director of the Wilmington-New Hanover County Museum will be the speaker for the May 31st meeting at 8:00 p.m. at Saint Andrews-Covenant Presbyterian Church.

Mr. Eyster will report on the activities of the 63rd Annual Meeting of the American Association of Museums and also speak on the plans for the local museum move from the Police building to the Market Street Armory.
"We Came to Town Yesterday by Water..."

A little less than 200 years ago, a cultured and vivacious Scotchwoman journeyed from Scotland to the West Indies, North Carolina and Portugal. Janet Schaw of Edinburgh kept a journal which was discovered accidentally in a search for other material.

In 1920 Evangeline Walker Andrews, one of the editors, wrote a preface to "The Journal of a Lady of Quality" at Orton Plantation and dedicated the "Journal" "To the memory of James Sprunt, chronicler of the Cape Fear."

Miss Schaw wrote of an America on the edge of revolution—she herself was in sympathy with the British and says, "the ladies have burnt their tea in a solemn procession, but they had delayed, however, till the sacrifice was not very considerable, as I do not think anyone offered above a quarter of a pound." The Edenton Tea Party is more widely known of similar protests in the south, but the tea was not "burnt" at Edenton and at the time Miss Schaw was in Wilmington, feeling against the British ran considerably higher here than in the northeastern section of the state. So, it is possible this is in reference to an event of which there is little real knowledge.

She further observes, "all the Merchants of any note are British and Irish (the Editors footnote Scots Irish) and many of the very genteel people. They all disapprove of the present proceedings. Many of them intend quitting the country as fast as their affairs permit them, but are yet uncertain what steps to take."

"They have very good Physicians, the best of whom is a Scotchman at whose home I have seen many of the first planters. I do not wish however to be much in their company, for, as you know, my tongue is not always under my command..."

The physician referred to is Dr. Thomas Cobbham whose residence was on Front Street between Princess and Chestnut. Cobbham settled on the Cape Fear in 1766 and his land holdings were considerable. His sympathies were loyalist and he accompanied Tryon on his campaign against the Regulators. After the battle of Moore's Creek bridge, he treated the loyalist wounded without pay. He joined and served with the British troops until his return to England in September of 1786 when he learned his North Carolina estate had been confiscated and sold. In the early records of land transactions at the New Hanover County Courthouse can be seen the recording of the confiscation proceedings.

As in the wars to follow, Wilmington's location was all important—"the ports are soon to be shut up, but this severity is voluntarily imposed by themselves, for they were indulged by Parliament and allowed the exclusive privilege of carrying on their trade with Europe, but which means they would not only have made great fortunes themselves by being the mart for the whole continent, but they would have held the power to serve the other Colonies by providing them in these commodities."

Janet Schaw had reason to be a visitor in North Carolina. A younger brother Robert owned "Schawfield," or "Sauchie" as he sometimes referred to it, a few miles above Wilmington. Located on the southwestern side of the Northwest branch of the Cape Fear, Schawfield covered 900 acres. He had purchased the northern part—about 500 acres—from James Moore and his wife Ann in 1772, just two years prior to his sister's visit. In the Brunswick County property descriptions, reference is made to the Mt. Misery Ferry.

While at "Sauchie," Miss Schaw writes, "We have an invitation to a ball in Wilmington, and will go down to it some day soon. This is the last to be given, as the Congress has forbid every kind of diversions, even card playing." On March 1 of 1775, the Wilmington Committee of Safety warned "a Mrs. Austin of the town to withdraw the plans for a ball at her house." As the ball referred to was to be held after the warning was issued, it's a guess as to whether it came about or not. However, arrangements could be made with the Committee of Safety, and with a determined hostess, perhaps they "went down to a ball in Wilmington."

She speaks with great regard of Mrs. Cornelius Harnett as "a pattern of industry" and says of Hilton as she came down by water..."...in a few miles further and very near the town, I found another (plantation) and must confess in all my life I never saw a more glorious situation. It fronts the conflux of the Northeast and the Northwest, which forms one of the finest pieces of water in the world. On this is a very handsome house and property situated to enjoy every advantage."

She is something less than charitable in her appraisal of the owner..."her husband is at best a brute by all accounts besides the president of the Committee and instigator of the great and unjust treatment the friends of the government are experiencing at the moment."

By self admission, Janet Schaw was prejudiced and an outspoken supporter of the loyalist cause. But she was an astute observer of the era, a journalist cognizant of the changing times and a reporter whose notes in a long lost manuscript reflect some interesting highlights of Wilmington in its early beginnings.