

1-1-2002

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Recommended Citation

May, Melissa (2002) "The Diary of Mary Saxton," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 44 : Iss. 4 , Article 8.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol44/iss4/8>

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The Diary of Mary Saxton

A chance discovery propels a Furman student back to the Civil War era — and into the life of a young Connecticut woman.

By Melissa May



Melissa May models an outfit similar to one Mary Saxton might have worn in 1865. May is a senior history/sociology major from Senatobia, Miss.

Although Furman is a relatively small place, you never know who you might meet here. In the fall of 2000, I encountered one of the more interesting people I have ever met. Her name: Mary Saxton. Her hometown: Windham, Conn.

My relationship with Mary actually began in May 2000, when a fire gutted a historic home in downtown Greenville and in the process almost destroyed some of the city's rarest historical documents — the papers of Vardry McBee, the man many consider to be the "Father of Greenville." McBee, a 19th-century mill owner, donated land to Furman, Christ Church Episcopal and many other historic institutions in Greenville while encouraging development and helping make the city what it is today.

One of McBee's great-great grandsons, Bevo Whitmire, married Mildred Edwards. A journalist, civic leader and amateur historian, Mildred Edwards Whitmire, who is now deceased, was extremely interested in local history and in her family's genealogy. Knowing of her interest, family and friends gave her many historical papers and books related to the city's history, and she added these documents to her own extensive collection of notes, letters and books. This collection was housed in her basement and throughout her home — the same home that caught fire.

At the time of the fire, Mildred's daughter, Beverly Whitmire, owned the house, which was divided into apartments. One of the tenants was Christina Buckley, a professor of Spanish at Furman. After the fire, Buckley needed help moving her possessions out of the house and called on a friend, Furman history professor Steve O'Neill.

When O'Neill arrived, Buckley introduced him to Beverly Whitmire — who instantly understood the import of their meeting. She told O'Neill, "God works in funny ways. He sent you to me to take these papers."

Fortunately, most of the collection had survived the fire unscathed. And perhaps God was watching out for O'Neill as well, because only a year earlier he had been named director of a new Furman project, the Center for the Study of Piedmont History (CSPH). The center's mission includes promoting the university's acquisition of primary research materials and overseeing internships for Furman

undergraduates at local historical sites and museums.

When O'Neill saw Mildred Whitmire's collection, he was ecstatic. He had heard rumors that the home harbored a treasure of local history, and now the collection was being entrusted to him. Today the McBee-Whitmire Collection resides in the Furman library.

In the fall of 2000, through the auspices of the CSPH, I was one of three students given the opportunity to work with the collection. Wes Page '01, a resident of nearby Simpsonville, organized the primary historical documents and began a preliminary computer cataloging process. Kenley Farmer '02 of Travelers Rest began wading through the ocean of secondary research collected by Mildred Whitmire. Including notes and files, the papers contained extensive correspondence between members of Vardry McBee's family and the Butlers of Edgefield, two of the most prominent South Carolina families of the past 150 years.

It was left to me, a Mississippi girl, to help complete the footnotes of McBee's personal diary from 1851. But before I could do so, I spent time sorting through boxes of books and magazines.

On my third day, as I was exploring yet another box, I came across a tiny, worn book wedged between several works of Shakespeare. Intrigued, I opened it carefully — and suddenly was swept back to the year 1865, and the world of 20-year-old Mary E. Saxton.

I quickly learned that Mary was born November 26, 1844, the youngest of three children. She lived with her parents, William and Sabra, and her older sister, Julia. Her brother, George, had been killed the year before in the Civil War.

The diary keeps a daily record of Mary's activities — cooking, cleaning, visiting friends and neighbors, working in a fabric store. Some typical excerpts:

Tuesday, January 17: spent the day as usual at home, engaged in domestic duties and sewing

Saturday, January 28: I again take up my diary to jot down the events of the day. arose at six. made fire and got breakfast helped Mother through the day, and with the work out doors and

some mending keeps me busy. evening I read aloud to Mother, and received a letter from Eva H. Pratt a young lady from Essex — who George became acquainted with while in New Haven and corresponded with her until his death. and sent him several presents.

While most of her entries recount her day-to-day life, Mary does not ignore the serious events surrounding her and talks at some length about the war. One of her most significant entries is dated April 15, the day after the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln.

She describes it as “a sad, sad day — the saddest our nation ever knew — can I say it — last night about 10 o'clock our good noble President was assassinated and died this morning at 22 min-past 7 o'clock.”

She goes on to describe how her community reacted to the tragedy:

Sunday, April 16: *Such a sad day — all the churches draped in mourning — The Cong [Congregational Church] had the large new flag thrown over the pulpit with Lincoln's picture draped with crape in the center with loops of black thrown over the flag — and loops of black and white festooned round the gallery's &c. All the flags are bound with black —*

Wednesday, April 19: *Funeral services took place in the Methodist church which was heavily draped — All the stores, shops and other places were trimmed and a great many houses —*

While Mary appears to be deeply affected by Lincoln's death, the most moving and revealing words she shares are about her brother, George. Toward the end of her diary, she records what she has learned about how and where he died:

Brother George was killed early in the morning of the 16th of May 1864 (aged 29 yrs) in the Rifle Pits at “Drury's Bluff” near Bermuda Hundred Va — not far from the rebel Capital Richmond. He with four comrades was shot one after the other by a Rebel Sharpshooter through the head. the ball entered his forehead and came out on the back of his head. He was insensible but lived about fifteen minutes — The “Stretcher Corps” entered the pits at the peril of their lives — and carried him until he died then buried him and marked the spot — he was buried by two officers . . .

Mary includes a few almost prayer-like lines to express her pride in her brother and her sadness over his death.

Farewell, farewell, dear Brother; Parents and Sisters mourn thy early death. But thou didst nobly serve thy country And now for our flag thy blood hath shed. And when called thy life hath given.

She describes copying all of the letters he sent home while at war, rewriting in ink the letters he had written in pencil. She includes a portion of one of his letters about his friend Ann, and this snippet seems to reveal a great deal about the relationship between Mary and her brother. They must have been very close for him to share such intimate words:

Though we [George and Ann] may never share each others destinies, in this world I trust that we are one in the sight of Heaven & that our love for each other will not be lost. God has made her an Angel of Mercy to allure me from skepticism & unbelief into the way of life and hope! Why should I not love her whom God has appointed the instrument of my salvation Oh but for her who can tell where I might have been today—

Mary's diary had a tremendous impact on me, and I was determined to find out more about her and what happened after December 31, 1865, when the diary ends. But records from that era are notoriously incomplete. I searched everywhere for Mary Saxton — census records, marriage records, anything. Ultimately, I contacted Harlan Jessup, president of the Stamford Ancestry Society in Connecticut, whose

research found that Mary's family remained in Windham for a while after 1865. He even discovered her address at the time she wrote the diary.

Jessup also found that on March 18, 1869, Mary left her family and Windham after marrying Edward S. Ellsworth of East Windsor, Conn. Perhaps she moved with her husband out West or down South; whatever the case, the trail stops after their marriage.

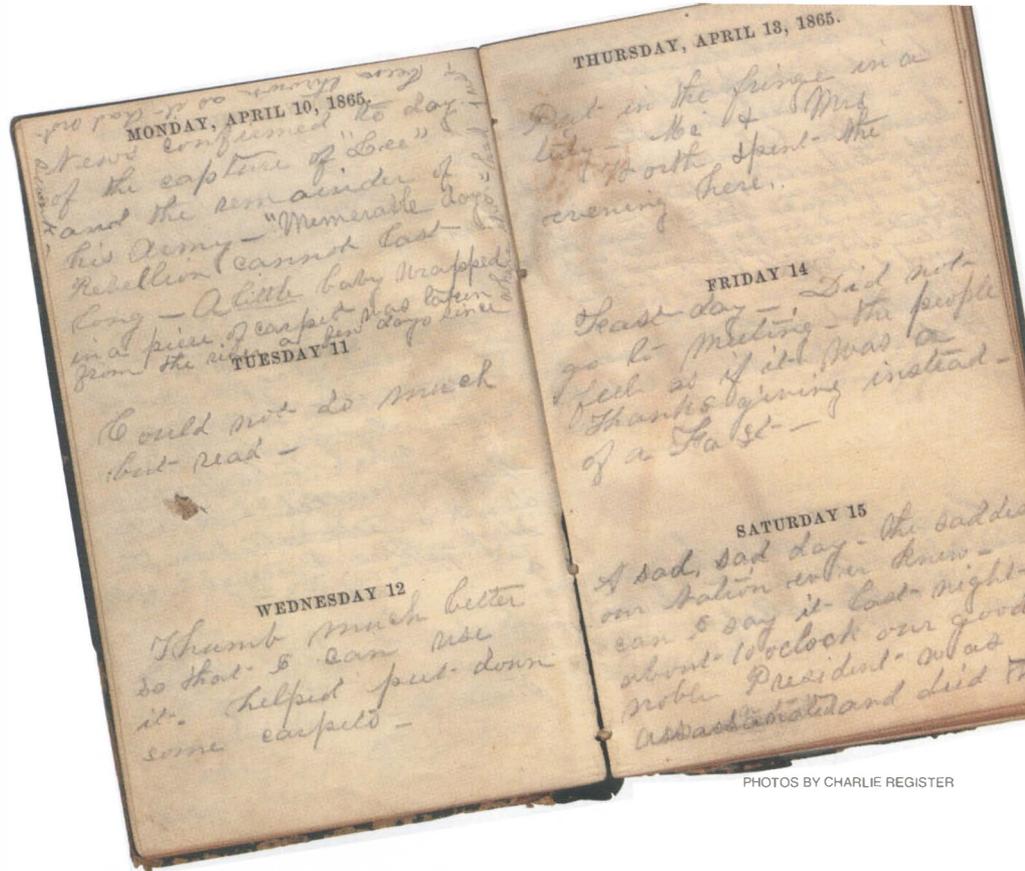
I also have no way of knowing how the diary became part of the McBee-Whitmire Collection. Mary's life would seem to have no connection with Greenville, Vardry McBee or Mildred Whitmire, but I'm glad it became part of the collection.

Perhaps one day, I'll learn the full story of Mary Saxton. I would love to know what happened to this fascinating young woman who drew me in and shared with me intimate details of her life and her world.

I never expected to find a friend like Mary. To me, she was much more than a figure to research and study.

She opened her world to me — and touched my heart. ●

The complete transcription of Mary Saxton's diary can be found on the Web at www.furman.edu/academics/dept/history/CSPH/primary/Saxtondiary/index.htm.



PHOTOS BY CHARLIE REGISTER