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Mary: The Life and Times of Mrs. Edward C. Walker of Willistead Manor, Walkerville

Kayla Dettinger

University of Windsor, detting@uwindsor.ca

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Mary: The Life and Times of Mrs. Edward C. Walker of Willistead Manor, Walkerville

Kayla Dettinger, University of Windsor

Importance of the Project

My research, presented through an Omeka site found at <http://ladywillistead.omeka.net/>, resulted from taking a course with Dr. Robert Nelson and Dr. Heidi Jacobs called History on the Web 43-397. One of the major themes of the course was to determine in what ways academic history could be made accessible and accepted on the internet for the public. It should be mentioned though that the inspiration for this project actually came from my grandmother, Mary Jane Dettinger, and her dedication to the preservation and restoration of Willistead Manor in Walkerville. The result was a digital archive and exhibition that I created that showcases the required skills of the new digital historian within historiography and the unseen primary sources of The Willistead Manor Archive. A particular interest of those who work alongside my grandmother on the behalf of Willistead Manor is that of the original owners, Edward Chandler Walker and Mary Walker. This has been the main focus of much of their collecting that has contributed to The Willistead Manor Archive. However, none of the documents have ever been examined for an academic purpose. Consequently, primary documents such as personal letters of Mary Walker and her Last Will and Testament have largely remained unseen by the public. My intention was to combine the growing need for historians to acquire digital skills with the theme of the History on the Web course. As a result, I have digitized the Archive along with about seventy other documents that I have found relating to Mary Walker. The goal was to make the primary resources accessible in a format that was very user-friendly. By sorting a large portion of the documents into thematic exhibits, I tried to recreate the atmosphere of a physical museum with the exception that one could access the knowledge right from one's own home. My presentation will focus on this idea with me acting as the museum curator for visitors interested in local history. The intention with this project from its inception was to encourage discovery and curiosity among any individual interested in Windsor's history. I wanted to recreate the fun and excitement that a student experiences digging around in an archive or looking through a database that a person may not be able to experience if they do not have access to academic resources. I believe that Willistead Manor is such an important fixture in the Windsor/Walkerville area that by focusing on the person of Mary Walker, we can discover a new dimension to a building that has served so many functions within our community.

Existing State of Knowledge

Being a local history project, there has not been a large amount of research done on Willistead Manor or its original inhabitants. Much of what is known about them derives from oral histories and local stories. However, research done by Art Jahns, who I credit on my website, on behalf of the Executive Board of Willistead Manor pieced together many of these oral stories using local resources to write biographies of both Edward and Mary. Using his research as a solid foundation, I consulted many of the same sources and was able to find many more through Leddy resources, particularly concerning her life as a widow. As a result, I have attempted to support the local knowledge of her with sources from Washington, Detroit, and even London, England.

Research Question

The aim of my project was to research the life of Mary Griffin Walker of Willistead Manor, identifying her aside from that of her husband's, by analyzing her representation in public newspapers and her personal feelings in private letters.

Methodology

As it was a local history project, my initial focus was on using all of the physical resources available to me. This meant that I examined several photographs of individuals and buildings, along with some local publications produced by the Friends of Willistead and the Executive Board of Willistead Manor for public knowledge. My best resource was in fact my grandmother, who provided me numerous stories and facts concerning the Manor and Mary which I then used as a foundation for my research where I attempted to either prove or disprove them. As there has not been much research on this topic, my intention was to amass as much information as possible in order to construct a complete chronology of Mary Walker's life. This resulted in exhausting every database that Leddy offers to find the necessary primary documents. The most useful were the newspaper databases where I was able to locate newspaper articles about Mary from The Detroit Free Press, The Washington Post, The Windsor Evening Record, The Border Cities Star, The Windsor Star, The New York Times, and several other local newspapers. Other useful resources were digitized sources made public by the Detroit Institute of Art and the Windsor's Community Museum.

As a digital historian, it was important that I did not limit myself to purely items made available on the internet. Some of the most interesting personal sources required a few fact-finding missions to Willistead itself, as well other local archives and private collections. Leddy Library was also useful in their Rare Books Collections as they had physical copies of sources that I understood existed but was unable to locate. The next stage of my research will involve traveling to Detroit to consult the archives at the DIA and the Public Library to discover more about her life living in Detroit before her marriage. Concerning my actual analysis of the documents, my main intent was to remain as objective as possible. Having grown up both hearing the stories of the Walkers and exploring the Manor's attics and back staircases, I was worried I would be too close to my subject and therefore misinterpret information in her favour. By only having a small selection of private letters relating to a particular period, I avoided trying to assume Mary's opinions or emotions at certain points in her life and relied instead on comparing newspapers to avoid biased interpretation. In fact, I discovered a few documents that challenged the traditional perception of Mary Walker as a quiet, stoic victim. Yet, with all of my sources it was necessary that I considered the intentions of the original authors. Being such a public figure, I found there was a stark contrast between the perception of her found in newspapers and those of close friends or employees. Therefore, I had to keep in mind how the figure of Mary Walker was manipulated according to the author's objective before I accepted the information as factual.

Findings

My findings have greatly expanded the knowledge on Mary Walker's life in its entirety. Prior to my research, the life of Mary Walker seemed to end with the death of her husband and her moving out of Willistead Manor regardless of the fact that she lived in Washington for twelve years after. One of my goals during my research was to attempt to uncover photographs relating to her life as we have only one confirmed photo of her. While I was unable to find photos of her, I was able to locate photos of her many residences and community projects. Additionally, I found numerous articles connecting her to various charities and foundations throughout her life. While living in Walkerville, Mary was extremely active not only as a representative of Walker & Sons Ltd, but also as a leader for several women's groups and children's charities. Worth mentioning is her equal charitable involvement in Detroit which indicates the cross-border culture that existed at the turn of the twentieth century in the Windsor/Detroit area. While living in Washington her philanthropy seemed to coincide more with her interests as she was a patron of the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra until her death. Interestingly enough, before my research it was assumed that Mary was a shy and reserved woman because of a lack of her mentioned publically. However, my research produced numerous Society articles in various newspapers, some of which I included as their own exhibit, mentioning her as guests to ambassadors, hosting nobility, travelling constantly, and even mentioned alongside that of Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt. Additionally, my research was able to recreate the history of Mary's art collecting. It is believed that Mary met her future husband, Edward Chandler Walker, through the Detroit art circle as both he and her father, Thomas Griffin, were deeply involved with the founding of the Detroit Institute of Art. Mary is usually listed only as an art sponsor on the annual reports of the DIA while Edward is noted as holding several tenures as president. However, the detail of her Will and the fact that she actively collected and loaned works of art to museums such as the Corcoran Gallery and the Metropolitan Museum of Art after Edward's death would indicate she had a high level of art knowledge when it came to collecting. She was also actively involved in sharing her knowledge, arranging for public workshops and showings. She would later donate her art collection, which she asked to be called the Edward C. and Mary Walker Collection, to the Corcoran Gallery in Washington. Her collection, with some pieces even currently on display, included works by Gainsborough, Melchers, and Monet.

Some of the more controversial events that I discovered relating to her life concern Edward's Will. In 1921, Mary decided that she no longer wanted to live at Willistead Manor and so her nephews, listed as the trustees of Edward's Estate, decided the manor would be given to the town of Walkerville and Mary would receive an annuity. The newspaper's rendition of the facts seems to depict a rather amicable exchange which resulted from a widow no longer desiring to live alone in such a large house. However, five personal letters of Mary sent to the wife of her former caretaker, Mr. Fox, seem to challenge the friendly atmosphere of the situation. Mary writes that she regrets leaving the manor in such a hurried manner, having left many important things behind, and alludes to some sort of unspecified issue with her nephews as she writes that she desires they do not enter Willistead, even telling Mrs. Fox to lie and say she would be returning. Yet, it seems that these personal letters indicate perhaps that Mary was not very close with the Walker family once her husband had died. After her departure from Walkerville, there are no mentions of any members of the Walker family visiting her in Washington in the Society pages. Instead, it would seem Mary was most close with her sister, Elizabeth Brewster, as they frequently visited each other during Mary's marriage and lived together both in Washington and Eastern Canada on occasion. Interestingly, her Will also indicates that Mary was not very close to her Griffin relatives as she explained why she chose to exclude certain family members and favour Elizabeth's daughters. It will only be with the discovery of more personal documents that the relationships Mary had with her various family members will be completely understood.

What remains to still be discovered relates more to her personal life. Not much is known of her life prior to her marriage and there still remains a lack of her voice within the narrative. My intention is to continue my research in Detroit to exhaust the resources of the Public Library and DIA's archive. I also

believe that I should focus on documenting the oral stories relating to Mary and Edward as both Walker relatives and descendants of their employees remain in the Windsor/Detroit area. Having the full support of the Executive Board of Willistead, I hope that by bringing public attention to my website local residents may be incited to share their stories and memories so that they too can be added to the history and help give a more complete image of Mary Griffin Walker.